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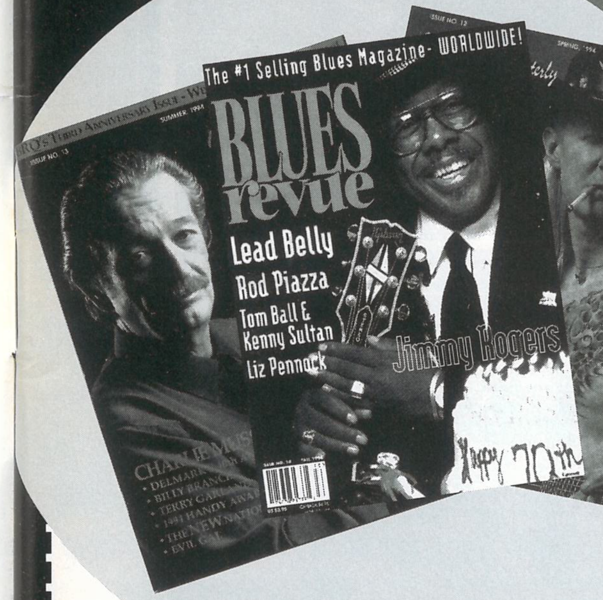

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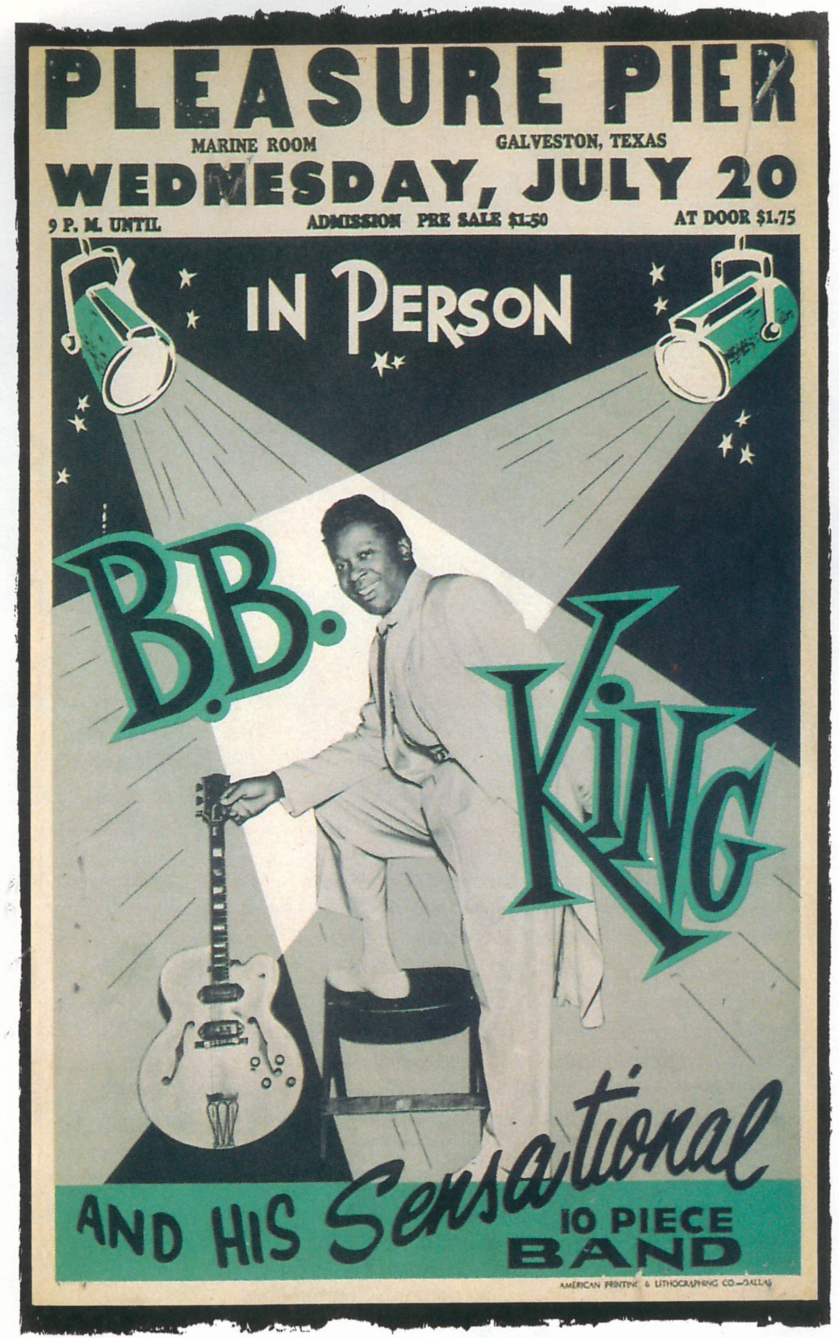
Photos: this page/*Ken Settle;* cover/*Jay Blakesberg*



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His name is a household word around the world. Yet, when you meet him, he greets you as a friend. His music is the essence of understatement. His story is remarkably simple, refreshingly so.

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Allow me to introduce you to B.B. King.

—Ernie Rideout

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Best of Guitar Player (ISSN 1063-4533) is published 10 times a year by Miller Freeman, Inc., 600 Harrison St., San Francisco, CA 94107. Telephone (415) 905-2200; fax (415) 905-2233; telex #278273. Please direct all advertising and editorial inquiries to: **Best of Guitar Player,** 411 Borel Ave., Suite 100, San Mateo, CA 94402. Telephone (415) 358-9500; fax (415) 358-9966; ITT telex #4994425. **Best of Guitar Player** is a trademark of Miller Freeman, Inc. All material published in **Best of Guitar Player** is copyrighted 1995 by Miller Freeman, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction of material appearing in **Best of Guitar Player** is forbidden without written permission. 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article and issue copies are available from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Tel: (313) 761-4700.

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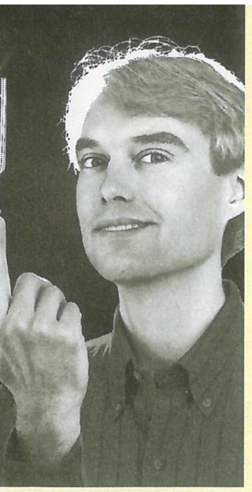
"They LAUGHED when I said they could have Perfect Pitch ...until I showed them the secret!"



The TRUE STORY
by David L. Burge

IT ALL STARTED in ninth grade as a sort of teenage rivalry.

I would slave at the piano for five hours daily. Linda didn't practice anywhere near that amount. But somehow she always seemed to have an edge which made *her* the star performer of our school. It was frustrating.

What does she have that I don't? I would wonder.

Linda's best friend, Sheryl, sensed my growing competition. One day she bragged on and on about Linda, adding more fuel to my fire. "You could *never* be as good as *Linda*," she taunted me. "*Linda's* got *Perfect Pitch*."

"What's Perfect Pitch?" I asked.

Sheryl gloated over a few of Linda's uncanny musical abilities: how she could name any tone or chord—*just by ear*; how she could sing any pitch she wanted—*from mere memory*; and how she could even play songs after only *listening* to them on the radio!

My heart sank. *Her fantastic EAR is the key to her success* I thought. How could I ever hope to compete with her?

But later I doubted Sheryl's story. How could anyone *possibly* know F♯ or B♭ just by *listening?* An ear like that would give someone a mastery of the entire musical language!

It bothered me. Did Linda *really* have Perfect Pitch? I finally got up the nerve and point-blank asked Linda if the rumors were true.

"Yes," she nodded to me aloofly.

But Perfect Pitch was too good to believe. I rudely pressed, "*Can I test you sometime?*"

"OK," she replied cheerfully.

I couldn't wait to call her bluff...

My plan was ingeniously simple: I picked a moment when Linda least suspected it. Then I boldly challenged her to name tones for me—*by ear*.

I made sure she had not been playing any music. I made her stand so she could not see the piano keyboard. I made certain other classmates could not help her. I set everything up so I could expose Linda's Perfect Pitch claims as a ridiculous joke.

Nervously I plotted my testing strategy. Linda appeared serene.

With silent apprehension I selected a tone to play. (She'll *never* guess F♯!)

I had barely touched the key.

"F♯," she said.

I was astonished.

I quickly played another tone. She didn't even stop to think. *Instantly* she announced the correct pitch.

Frantically, I played more and more tones, here and there on the keyboard, but each time she would somehow know the pitch—without effort. She was SO amazing—she could identify tones as easily as *colors!*

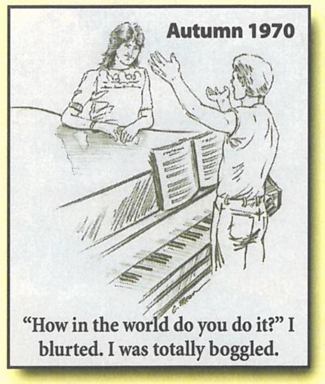
"Sing an E♭," I demanded, determined to mess her up.

With barely a pause she sang the proper pitch. I had her sing tone after tone. But as I checked her on the keyboard, I found that she sang each note perfectly on pitch.

I was totally boggled. "*How in the world do you do it?*" I blurted.

"I don't know," she sighed. And to my dismay, that was all I could get out of her!

The dazzle of Perfect Pitch hit me hard. My head was dizzy with disbelief, yet from that moment on I knew *Perfect Pitch is real.*



"How in the world do you do it?" I blurted. I was totally boggled.

I couldn't figure it out...

"*How does she DO it?*" I kept asking myself. On the other hand, why doesn't *everyone* know musical tones by ear?

Then it dawned on me that *most musicians* can't tell C from C♯, or A major from F major—like artists who brush painting after painting without ever knowing green from turquoise. It all seemed so odd and contradictory. I found myself even more mystified than before.

Humiliated and puzzled, I went home to work on this problem. At age 14, this was a hard nut to crack.

You can be sure I tried it myself. I would sweet-talk my three brothers and two sisters into playing tones for me, then guess each pitch by ear. My many attempts were dismal failures.

So I tried playing the tones *over* and *over* in order to memorize them. I tried to feel the "highness" or "lowness" of each pitch. I tried day after day to learn and absorb those elusive tones. But nothing worked. I simply could *not* recognize the pitches by ear.

After weeks in vain, I finally gave up. Linda's gift was indeed extraordinary. But for me, it was out of reach.

Then it happened...

It was like a miracle. A twist of fate. Like finding the lost Holy Grail.

Once I had stopped *straining* my ear, I started to listen NATURALLY. Then the incredible secret to Perfect Pitch jumped right into my lap.

I began to notice faint "colors" within the tones. Not *visual* colors, but colors of *pitch,* colors of *sound.* They had always been there. But this was the first time I had ever "let go"—and *listened*—to discover these subtle differences within the musical tones.

Soon I too could recognize the tones by ear! It was simple. I could hear how F♯ sounds one way, while B♭ has a different pitch color sound—sort of like "listening" to red and blue!

The realization hit me: THIS IS PERFECT PITCH! This is how Bach, Beethoven and Mozart could mentally envision their masterpieces—and name tones, chords and keys all by ear—*by tuning in to these subtle "pitch colors" within the tones.*

It was almost childish—I felt sure that *anyone* could unlock their own Perfect Pitch by learning this simple secret of "color hearing."

Excitedly I told my best friend Ann (a flutist) that *she* could have Perfect Pitch too. She *laughed* at me.

"You have to be *born* with Perfect Pitch," she asserted.

"You just don't understand how *easy* Perfect Pitch is," I explained.

I showed her how to listen. Timidly, she confessed that she too could hear the pitch colors. From this discovery, it wasn't long before Ann had *also* acquired Perfect Pitch! We became instant school celebrities. Classmates loved to test our abilities, leaving everyone awed and amazed by the power of our virtuoso ears.

Way back then I did not know the impact I would have when years later I explained my discovery to college music professors. I was surprised that many of them *laughed* at me at first. You may have guessed it—they told me, "One must be *born* with Perfect Pitch." Yet once I revealed the simple *secret* to Perfect Pitch—*and they heard for themselves*—you'd be surprised at how fast they would change their tune!

As I continued my own music studies, my Perfect Pitch ear allowed me to progress far faster than I ever thought possible. I even *skipped over* two required college courses. Perfect Pitch made *everything* much easier—performing, composing, arranging, sight-reading, transposing, improvising—and it enhanced my *enjoyment* of music as well! I learned that music is definitely a HEARING art.

And as for Linda?

Oh yes—time eventually found me at the end of my senior year of high school, with my *final chance* to outdo Linda. Our local university sponsored a music festival each spring. I went all out for it. Guess what? I scored an A+ in the most advanced performance category. Linda only got an A.

Sweet victory was music to my ears—mine at last!

THESE DAYS, thousands of musicians and two university studies have already proven my Perfect Pitch method. *Now I'd like to show YOU how to experience your own Perfect Pitch!*

I hope *you* won't laugh as you picture *yourself* with various Perfect Pitch skills—like naming tones and chords by ear with laser-like accuracy! I think you will be surprised at just how simple Perfect Pitch really is—*and how very valuable.*

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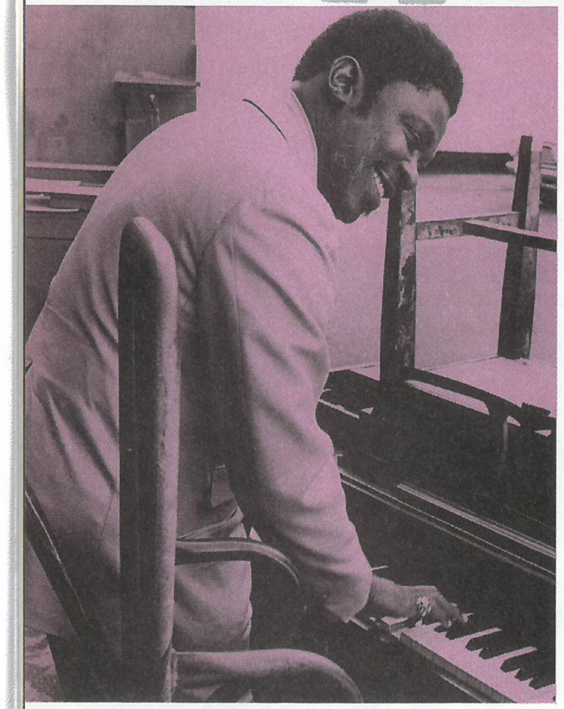
he's just B.B. King

by Tom Wheeler

Riley B. King is the world's preeminent blues guitarist. There is hardly a rock, pop, or blues player anywhere who doesn't owe him something, although because much of his influence has been indirectly transmitted through rock stars, more than a few may be unaware of that debt. His dedication is as inspiring as his talent, and it's hard to imagine someone working harder at music, or anything else. For decades Riley, better known as B.B., has worked a staggering 300 nights a year or more, in part because he feels that he must live up to a long-held title. They call him King of the Blues.

"There are days when I don't feel like going onstage," he admits, "but whether I want to go on or not, I *must* go on. Usually when I'm up there, I try and do like an electric eel and throw my little shock through the whole audience, and usually the reaction comes back double-force and pulls me out of it, because the people can *help* you entertain; they become a part of it. It's something

he's just B.B.



"When I became a disc jockey with my own one-hour show they would call me 'the blues boy.' A lot of times they'd shorten it to B.B., and I liked that, and it stuck with me all this time."

like radar: You send out a beam, and it hits and comes back with even more energy."

Sweating in the spotlight, working on the fretboard, B.B. seems like a string-bending surgeon with his deft and confident left-hand technique. Unlike many self-taught guitarists, he plays very efficiently, without the wasted effort that comes from using the wrong fingers. He takes a breath. From his expression you know that in a split second Riley B. King will lay himself bare. He extends an irresistible invitation to share in the simple transfer of joy and pain which he has perfected: He stings Lucille; Lucille stings you. David Bromberg recently put it this way: "Usually in a good concert you'll hear people say 'ooh' or 'aah' at various times, but when B.B. plays they all go 'ooh' at the same time and 'aah' at the same time. He doesn't just play his guitar; he plays his audience."

Many of the post-Beatles guitar stars were of course technically accomplished and innovative, but in most cases, beneath the arrangements and the special effects were guitar licks unmistakably attributable to B.B. King and other American bluesmen who, in the U.S. at least, were then known only to limited numbers of blues buffs. Aside from phrases and blues scales, the dynamics of rock guitar as a communicative vehicle also owe much to the originality of B.B. King. He can make Lucille talk in an almost literal sense, with screams, sassy put-downs, cute little tickles, or an unabashed plea for love. He can articulate the hopelessness of poverty or a love gone wrong with a poetic subtlety rarely matched by mere words.

When he was developing what has become one of the world's most readily identifiable guitar styles, B.B. borrowed from Lonnie Johnson, T-Bone Walker, and others, integrating his precise, vocal-like string bends and his patented left-hand vibrato, both of which have become indispensable components of rock guitar's vocabulary. His economy, his every-note-counts phrasing, has been a model of taste and style for thousands of players. Mike Bloomfield was awestruck upon hearing Eric Clapton in the mid '60s. Later describing his impression, he groped for superlatives: "He was as good as . . . *B.B. King*." For Bloomfield, an ardent musicologist, it was the ultimate tribute.

According to one prevalent view, there is some quantum of suffering that must be endured before an entertainer "qualifies" as a blues artist. Under anybody's standard, B.B. King has qualified many times over. He was born on a Mississippi plantation and earned 35¢ for each 100 pounds of cotton he picked; he once calculated that he had walked thousands of miles behind a plow during his years as a farmhand. It was only during the rainy season that he was allowed to leave the farm to attend school, and he walked ten miles to join his 85 classmates in their one-room schoolhouse. For two decades he took his music to scores of obscure and often sleazy bars throughout the South, where isolation crushed the dreams of many a performer.

At age 24 King was performing in a bar in Twist, Arkansas, when two men started a fight, kicking over a barrel-sized kerosene lamp. The building erupted in flames, and the panic-stricken crowd scrambled into the street. Not having enough money to replace his $30 guitar, B.B. raced back in to save it. The man who was later to acquaint much of the world with the blues was almost burned to death, and just after his escape the building collapsed, killing two other men. When he learned that the fight had been over a woman named Lucille, he gave that name to his beloved instrument and its many successors "to remind me never to do a fool thing like that again." The story is the stuff of legends, but legends sometimes spawn stereotypes, and B.B. King is a complex man, one who in the interview that follows disavows several popular images of blues entertainers.

The young B.B. King spent countless hours in the small recording facilities used by Kent (later Kent/Modern), Crown, and Blue Horizon, turning out regional hits in the early '50s. He estimates that he's recorded over 300 sides in all, although because of poor distribution and low retail prices he never reaped much profit on many of them.

He cut more LPs after signing with ABC-Paramount in 1961, one of the best of which is *Live At The Regal*. He was transferred to ABC's now defunct Bluesway label in 1967, and he made the R&B charts a year later with "Paying The Cost To Be The Boss." Producer Bill Szymczyk contributed much energy to *Live And Well* in 1969, and it was hailed in *Down Beat* as "the most important blues recording in many years."

Finally in 1970, over 20 years after cutting his first record, B.B. scored a nationwide hit with "The Thrill Is Gone." Though it employed a string section and thoroughly modern production, he is suspicious of the emphasis so often placed on elaborate recording techniques, noting that many early blues classics were cut in garages or mobile facilities. In fact, his first major R&B hit, RPM's "Three O'Clock Blues," was recorded in 1950 in the Memphis YMCA. It stayed on top of the regional charts for four months, and as he discusses below, it changed his life.

This classic interview first appeared in the September 1980 issue of Guitar Player.

B.B. has been acclaimed in virtually every music poll, and his affection for music of almost all types continues offstage. In his hotel room, a bed or table is usually covered with mounds of cassette tapes, perhaps 50 of them, "just for my own listening enjoyment." He often practices long into the morning hours, even during periods of grueling roadwork, and spends much of his free time listening to the records in his mammoth collection at home.

B.B.'s approach to his art is not only the cornerstone of a distinguished career but also a metaphor for a remarkable philosophy of self-improvement and universal brotherhood. In 1973 he and Fayette, Mississippi, mayor Charles Evers co-sponsored a memorial festival commemorating slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. B.B. was a founding member of the JFK Performing Arts Center and has received public service awards from B'nai B'rith and many other organizations. He co-founded the Foundation for the Advancement of Inmate Rehabilitation and Recreation. He has played many prison benefits and been cited for his service by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. He is a licensed pilot and an accomplished player of several instruments other than guitar. He received an honorary doctorate from Mississippi's Tougaloo College, and his hometown renamed a park after him and painted a guitar on the street near the corner where the King of the Blues used to play for dimes. The town turned out to see him put his large hands in the wet cement, and the tribute was a highlight of B.B. King's life.

In the following interview B.B. reflects upon his professional standards, his guitar techniques, and his more than 30 years as a bluesman. He rejects certain public perceptions of blues performers and explains the evolution of his relationship to his art. B.B. King is witty, gracious, independent, and significantly more eclectic than his contemporaries. At the core of his career is a dedication to his ideals, to his fans, and to his belief that music is a social tool, a vehicle for bringing people together.

……

When were you born, and where did you grow up?

I was born in 1925 in the country outside of Itta Bena, Mississippi, which is not too awful far from Indianola. My parents separated when I was around four, and I spent some time in the hills of Mississippi, up around Kilmichael. That's where I lost my mother, when I was nine. I was a farmhand all of my life, until I was inducted into the Army and sent to Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1943. I was plowing, driving tractors and trucks, chopping cotton—everything that one does on a farm, I did some of it.

When did you first encounter music?

The first music was in church. From that time until now, that . . . certain something was instilled into me. I had been baptized as a Baptist, then I was in the Holiness—the Church Of God In Christ—and the singing and the music in the churches was something that a small boy, even in his 50s today, will never forget.

What did your family think of you playing the blues when you started?

I couldn't play them at home. I was formerly a spiritual singer, and they wouldn't go for the blues, not around the house [*laughs, shakes his head*], not then. That's one thing about the early days of the blues. A few of the spiritual people *liked* blues, but they would play *their* blues after 12:00, when they were in their room and nobody could hear them. But you always had a few devils like myself and a few others that would listen to *anything*. You played it and it sounded good, we would listen to it. I was singing spirituals in my first group, the Elkhorn Singers, but I'd love to go to juke joints at that time.

What made you choose the guitar?

I think that a lot of that has to do with the Sanctified Church, because this preacher played guitar in the church, and that was one thing. But also, guitars were kind of available. The average home had a guitar and a harmonica, usually; you could always find them around. But saxophones, trumpets, pianos, and things like that were rare. Only the middle class families would have a piano. Sometimes a lot of us would like to sneak in the church to play with the piano, and many of us got jobs as janitors, because this enabled us to be near it. We'd be cleaning up the church or something like that, and get a chance to fool with a piano a little bit.

Do you remember your first guitar?

My first one was a Stella, about two-and-a-half feet long, with the big round hole in it, and it was red, one of their little red guitars. I was making $15 a month, so I paid seven-and-a-half the first month and seven-and-a-half the next one. I kept it for a long, long time. It was stolen, but I don't remember when. The next one was a Gibson I bought in Memphis with the help of my cousin, Bukka White. It was an acoustic, but we had just learned about DeArmond pickups. I didn't have enough money to buy the regular electric, so we bought that and put a pickup on it that cost $27. The very first Fenders—I had one. I used it when I first went out on the road, '49 or early '50. I also had a little Gibson amplifier that was about a foot wide, and about half a foot thick [*chuckles at the recollection*], with a speaker in it of about eight inches, I suppose, and that was my amplifier, and I kept it for a long time.

When did you begin playing professionally?

In the middle 1940s, in Indianola, on the corner of Church and Second Street. Second Street is like the main part of town, and Church Street crossed it and went into the black area, what we called "across the tracks." I never passed the hat, but the people knew that I'd appreciate a dime if I played a tune they'd requested.

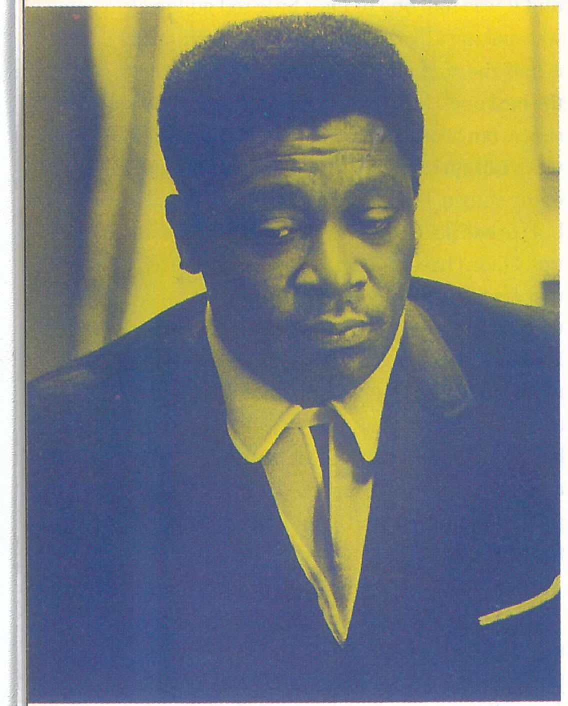
Why had you picked that particular corner?

I was afraid to sit in the square near city hall, because I probably would have been run out of there. I forget the name of the sheriff that we had then [*laughs*], and on my corner both the blacks and the whites would see me. It wasn't something I planned; it was just like a good fishing place—it seemed like a nice spot to be. You'd find me on that corner on Saturdays, and sometimes after I got off work I'd take my bath, get my guitar, and hitchhike to other little towns like Itta Bena or Moorhead or Greenville. Most times I was lucky. I'd make more money that evening than I'd make all week driving tractors. I'd probably have enough money for a movie. Next day, go to church, then back to work. At the time I was making $22.50 a week with the tractors.

Do you remember your first paying job as a musician?

I don't remember my first paid gig, but I remember the first gig where I started working for like a week at a time—1949 that was, in West Memphis, at a place called the 16th Street Grill. That lady was paying me $12 a night, room and board. I was 24 years old, and that was more money—I didn't know there was that

he's just B.B.



"Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker were playing before me, and they didn't know me from Adam. I was *plowin'* when they was *playin'*."

much money in the world. So that's how that started. That was me alone up there—sing, and then play, as I normally do. Sing and play. Working there made me think about going on the radio as a disc jockey, because the lady at the grill told me that if I could get my own show like Sonny Boy Williamson and Bobby Nighthawk and quite a few of the guys, she would give me a steady weekly job, and I *loved* that idea.

How did you acquire the name "B.B."?

The idea came from the local radio station where I was working, WDIA. I was singing some advertisements for Pepticon, one of these cure-all patent medicines. Later, when I became a disc jockey with my own one-hour show, they would call me "the blues boy," or "the boy from Beale Street." A lot of times they'd shorten it to B.B., and I liked that, and it stuck with me all this time.

Before you were nationally recognized, was there much contact between you and your contemporaries such as Muddy Waters? Were you aware of each other; did you have each other's records and so forth?

No. I had *their* records, but see, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker and all of those guys were playing *before* me, and they didn't know me from Adam. I was *plowin'* when they was *playin'* [*laughs*]! I liked them, and I imagine that they were aware of each other. But they didn't know anything about me, no. Like Ike Turner was about 14 years old when I first met him, in Clarksdale, Mississippi. I had this great big band at that time, which consisted of my guitar, a set of drums, and a saxophone. That was a *big band*, wasn't it? When Ike saw me [*laughs*], he said, "Oh, *man*, you need *help*!"

What was it like gigging for years in small, segregated clubs all over the South?

Well, you hear this term "chitlin circuit." That's not one of my terms, but they're talking about the joints where we used to play before we started to play the white establishment. These clubs were small, most of them, and always across the tracks, in the black area. A lot of the promoters couldn't afford to pay you very much money, and if they didn't have a pretty good crowd, sometimes you didn't get paid at all. I only have about $180,000 owed up to me from my playing during my career. I'd say 90% of the promoters were for real, just like they are today. But then you had the other 10%—the young promoter, probably his first time to give a dance or concert. If he didn't make it, that was it, because he had thrown in everything he had to do this one concert, which he felt would be a gold mine. He'd say to himself, "Well, if I can get B.B. King or Junior Parker or whoever, *this* night they're going to pull me through," and a lot of times that didn't happen, and when it didn't happen for that promoter, you didn't find him. He wasn't around afterwards.

When you started entertaining, did you think of yourself mainly as a singer, as opposed to a guitar player?

When I first started, couldn't nobody tell me I couldn't sing. See, if you told me I couldn't sing then, I would have an argument with you. Later on, I found out how little I really knew, how bad it really sounded. I then found out that my guitar playing wasn't any good either [*laughs*]. It's funny how this happens, because at first, you believe that you *really* have it, like you're God's great gift. I mean I felt like that, I really did, and had someone told me I wasn't, well, I would just ignore them because I figured they didn't know what they were talking about. My singing was more popular in the early years than my guitar playing. I was crazy about Lonnie Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, T-Bone Walker, Elmore James, and many, many others, and if I could have played like them, I would have, but I've got a thick head that just don't make it, and my fingers—they don't work either. Therefore, I think my playing was very, very, *very* limited, more so than my singing, because I did have a kind of style of singing at that time.

Compared to many electric guitarists, you play few notes.

I was at the Apollo Theater one time, and there was a critic there, and to me what he said was one of the great compliments that people have given me. The critic wrote: "B.B. King sings, and then Lucille sings." That made me feel very good, because I do feel that I'm still singing when I play. That's why I don't play a lot of notes maybe like some people. Maybe that's the reason why most of my music is very simple—that's the way I sing. When I'm playing a solo, I hear me singing through the guitar.

How did people like Django Reinhardt and T-Bone Walker influence you?

In the way they phrase. They still do it today. Even though they may be in different categories, even though some are jazz and some are blues, when I hear them *phrase*, each note to me seems to say something. And it doesn't have to be 64 notes to a bar. Just one note sometimes seems to tell me a whole lot. So that's one of the reasons why I like them. Same thing with Louis Jordan; even though he plays saxophone, the way he phrases seems to tell me something, and that can just stop me cold when I listen.

Did you play rhythm guitar first?

No, I never accompanied myself, still can't. I *cannot* play and sing at the same time; I just can't do it. I've always been featured from the very beginning. I still can't play rhythm worth anything, because I never had the chance to really play in a rhythm section. But I know a few chords.

Did you invent the fingerstyle, perpendicular-to-the-neck vibrato?

LEFT PHOTO: JON SEIVERT

he's just B.B.

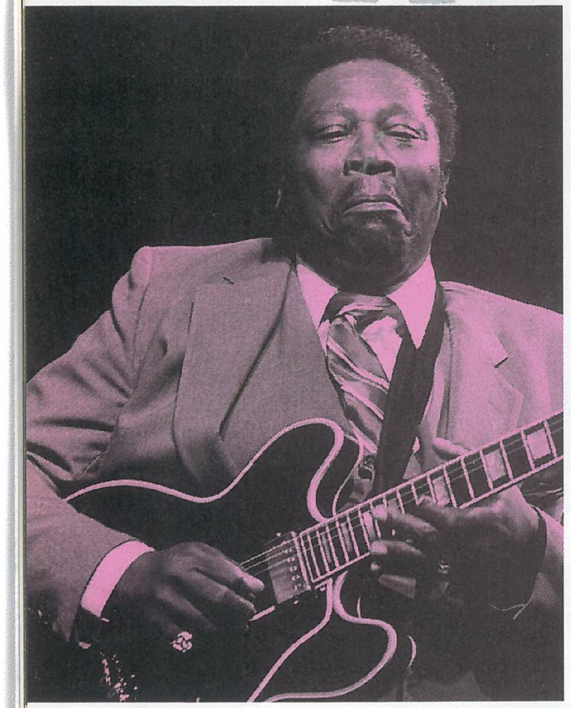


PHOTO: JON SEIVERT

"They say, 'You're not playing the same thing that you played the last time.' But I don't want to play the same thing I played last time."

Let's put it this way: I won't say I invented it, but they weren't doing it before I started [*laughs*]. I will say that I'm still trying. Bukka White and quite a few other people used bottlenecks. As I said, I got stupid fingers. They won't work. If I get something like that in my hand and try to use it, it just won't work. So my ears told me that when I trilled my hand, I'd get a sound similar to the sound they were getting with a bottleneck. And so for about 32 or 33 years I've been trying to do it, and now they tell me that I'm doing a little better.

What about the idea of hitting the fret a step lower than the intended note and bending it up—were people doing that before you?

Yes, but I'd never heard anybody do it the way I do it. My reason was that my ears don't always hear like they should. I'm always afraid that I might miss a note if I try to hit it right on the head, so if I hit down and slide up to it, my ears tell me when I get there. But also it's more like a violin or a voice; you just gliss up to it.

Were there any milestones in the evolution of your technique, specific experiences or events that made you alter your approach?

I don't think so. It was like this cancer that got hold of me and started to eat on me. Like when I heard T-Bone Walker play the electric guitar, I just had to have one. I had to play, but it's been a gradual thing, and it still goes on. In fact, if you went to my room right now you'd find a Blind Lemon tape that I've been listening to whenever I'm lying around.

Do you take many cassettes on the road?

I take quite a few in order to hear the old things. I listen to the radio to hear the modern music, but I like to go back to some of the old things so that I can keep the same feeling. I like contemporary things with slick changes, but even if I play them I like to put in the feeling of yesterday. You're lost with either extreme, so I try to make a happy medium and do them together.

Your record collection is something of a legend.

Well, I've got over 30,000 records now. You won't believe this, but even though they're not alphabetized I can always tell if one's missing. One day I plan to get me one of these home computers and enter them all into that. Every time I go home I just tape, tape, tape. [*B.B. has since donated his record collection to the Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi.*]

Do you play visualized patterns on the fingerboard, or do you hear a note or phrase in your head before you hit it on the guitar?

I hear it first, sure do. It's like some guys use an electronic tuner and just look at the needle on the meter, but I can't buy that; I have to hear it, and it's the same with a phrase. No one else can set your hat on your head in a way that suits you. I don't think I've ever seen anybody that when you put their hat on their head they didn't take their hand and move it, even if it's just a bit. Well, I'm like that with the guitar. Do it your own way. When I play it's like trying to describe something to someone; it's a conversation where you say something in a certain way. A lot of times I play with my eyes closed, but in my mind I can still see the people paying attention to what I'm doing. I can see them as if they're saying, "Yeah, okay, I get it." Playing the guitar is like telling the truth—you never have to worry about repeating the same thing if you told the truth. You don't have to pretend or cover up. If someone asks you again, you don't have to think about it or worry about it. To me, playing is the same way. If you put yourself into it, instead of something else, then when you get out there on the stage the next time, you don't have to worry, because there it is. It's you.

Today you're doing things on guitar that sound different from what you were doing only six months ago. Your style seems to continue to grow.

Well, I hope so, because I do study. People hold it against me sometimes. They say, "You're not playing the same thing that you played the last time." But I don't *want* to play the same thing I played last time. That would get boring. I always try to add something, or maybe take something away, to give it a little twist.

Do you play instruments other than guitar?

I try. I was doing pretty good on clarinet before I got ripped off for one. I got to where I could read faster on clarinet than I could on guitar. I know a few scales on the violin, and I fool with that a bit. I'm a little better with piano, and better than that with bass. Drums—I did some time with them too. Also harmonica.

Does working with other instruments alter your approach to guitar?

Yes, it affects my phrasing, and it makes me a little more fluent. It's something for me to do when I'm not practicing like I should. I usually practice mentally, but when it comes to physical practice, I'm a little lazy. I don't know how it is with other musicians, but with me sometimes I don't play like I want to, and then I get a little bit disgusted and lay off for a while. Then one day, something happens, and I can't wait to get back to it.

You mentioned mental practice.

Sometimes I hear something—someone will walk by and whistle, or I'll hear it on the music in a restaurant—and I'll start to look at the fingerboard in my mind to see how I'd do it. I visualize the different ways to do it. That's a good thing to do; it helps you learn the guitar. Just don't do it too much when you're driving, or you'll forget where you're going [*laughs*].

Do you ever stick your neck out onstage, or do you usually reassemble a series of notes, a scale perhaps, the structure of which is already known to you?

In my room, you'd be surprised at all the things I try, but I never go out on a limb, not onstage, no, no, no. I make enough mistakes without it. The guys in the band always tease me. But if you're in the key of *C* and really don't want a *Cmaj7*—that *B* note—if you should hit it, you can flatten it and get the dominant 7th, which sounds all right, and if you make a mistake and hit the *A*, it's the 6th, so it's still relative. I learned through these many years of being out there and hoping to get everybody working with me that if you make a mistake, *please* work something into it, so that it's *not* a mistake.

There's a very unusual melody line near the end of "Chains And Things" on Indianola Mississippi Seeds, where . . .

. . . I made a mistake. Now you're getting all the secrets. My bandleader and I have laughed about it many times, but I made a mistake and hit the wrong note and worked my way out of it. We liked the way it sounded, so we got the arranger to have the strings follow it. They repeat the phrase the way I played it. If you've got a good take going and then hit one wrong note, you don't want to stop, so I was in the key of *A♭*, and when I hit [hums *E, D♭, E♭, E♭*], which is 5, 4, 5, 5, we just got the rest of the band to follow right along.

Do you read music?

Reading music is what I call spellin'. I *spell*; I read slowly. If the metronome is not goin' *too* fast, I can do it pretty good.

"Three O'Clock Blues" was your first major R&B hit. How did it change your life?

I could go into the important theaters. As far as the black people were concerned, when you were getting into show business there were three places you *had* to go through to be acclaimed: the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., the Royal Theater in Baltimore, and the Apollo Theater in New York. "Three O'Clock Blues" enabled me to go into these places, and it opened other areas, like one-nighters. I had been making about $85 a week with my playing and being on the radio and everything else I could do—$85 total—and when I recorded that first big hit, I started making $2,500 a week. I didn't get to keep all of it, but that was the guarantee.

In the early years, how widespread was racial prejudice in show business?

In the *early* years—you mean right now?

Well, I was talking about. . . .

Well, *I* do. It still happens. A lot of things are not happening for us as blacks as they do for the whites. It's a fact. It's a *natural* fact. I've been one of the lucky few. A lot of things have happened for me, yes; a lot of things have happened for a lot of blacks. But when you compare it to what's happening for the whites, it's a big difference, a great big difference. Fortunately, though, it has gotten much better over the past few years. Blacks get better breaks. We're getting there.

Does racism exist predominantly in one field—radio, recording, club work?

You find it in all of them. I can't say which is more, one or the other. But the problem is never with the musicians themselves; it doesn't matter to them. Even when it was very segregated down South, the players always got together and had a good time. Still do. The trouble's been more with the companies, the establishment. Being a blues singer is like being black two times—twice. First you've got to try to get the people to dig the blues, and then to dig you. As a blues singer today, yes, I'm very popular. The FM radio is usually very fair with us, but you won't hear B.B. King or blues very often on AM radio. And I'm not only talking about the white stations. I'm talking about the black ones, too.

Your music is kept off of some white stations because you're black, and off of some black stations because it's blues?

Yeah, of course! I remember once I went to a black dude, a disc jockey that had a program in the South, and he said, "You know, every day we have an hour of blues." I said, "Really? Who do you play?" He said, "Well, I play you, Bobby Bland, Junior Parker, Albert King," and so on. I said, "What about Jimmy Reed or John Lee Hooker?" "No," he said, "they don't fit my program." And that really got me uptight, you know. This guy is lord and master. He knows what everybody wants. I guess by being a Virgo, I'm a little sarcastic sometimes, so I said, "Well, how long is your station on the air?" He said 12 hours. And I said, "And you play a *whole hour* of blues?" He says, "Yeah." I said, "Well *look* [*laughs*], why be so nice to us blues singers and give us a whole hour? Why not play a record or two during them *other* 11 hours?" He didn't like what I said, but I didn't really care, because that's the way I felt and that's the way I feel today.

Have the attitudes of black people toward the blues changed over the years?

They're changing. Today they're not ashamed of it. We've always had black people who like blues, but if I had to try and put it into categories, we had the people that were down here with me, that did the work, you know. Then you had the middle and upper classes, as we called them in Mississippi. The people that worked on the plantations, the regular working class people—*they* understood. They were never ashamed. About 90% of them were a part of it in the beginning; they knew what I was doing. A lot of them could do it even better than I do. But then you had that middle class. A *few* of them would be down with us, and then the others would play our records, but like I said before, they'd only play them after 12:00, you dig? They felt that blues was kind of degrading a bit. They were made to be ashamed of it. They liked blues, but they weren't particular about everybody knowing about it. It's just like me. I like to eat sloppy, and I'd rather eat in my room rather than let people catch me. Among the upper class, the college graduates and the ones who had money, only a precious few would acknowledge my kind of music in the early days. That is changing today, and they're listening.

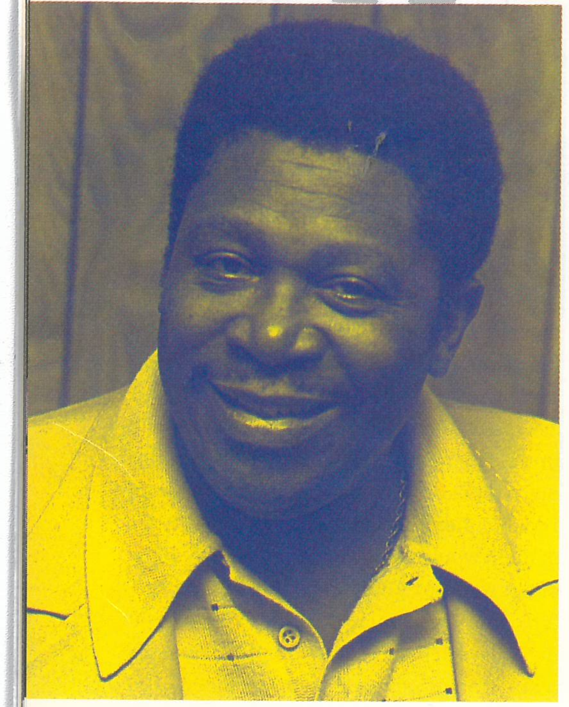
Early on, were you more popular among younger listeners?

Some of the people have stood up and been counted all along, of course. This is a funny thing to say, but it's the truth: When I was young, young people as a mass didn't dig me. When I was, say, like 20 years old, it was always people my age and older. But today, we are gaining ground because black kids will come up to me and say, "Hey, I don't dig the blues, but I dig *you*." So I think we're making progress. At some concerts we'll have all ages and colors. That I like. Lately we're starting to have not just blacks and young whites, but older whites too. I'm surprised, but we have them.

You once complained about the notion that in order to be a blues singer you have to be in torn clothes, you can't be successful, and you've got to be high on something. Do you still encounter that attitude?

I think that that's the one thing that has been *the* big mistake about people in the blues.

he's just B.B.



> "We are a part of each other, you know. Those problems used to affect me individually, directly, and now they affect me indirectly. When one person is hurt, it hurts me too."

They seem to think that you have to be high or just completely smashed or stoned out of your head to be able to play blues, and that's *wrong*. And then I don't think that a guy has to be in patched trousers. That image that people seem to put on us is wrong. Blues music is like any other kind of music. Some of us excel, and some of us don't. Some of us are really able to please people, and some of us are not. But we all have the blues. Red, white, black, brown, yellow—rich, poor—we all have these blues. You can be successful and still have the blues. I have been fortunate, and yet now I have more to sing about than I ever did before.

You're referring to the world situation?

Yes. I look around me and I read the papers, and I see what's happening in this country and all over the world. Here, there are money troubles. Food's running low in other places. There's been price fixing, and oil problems. I go to the prisons, and I see what's happening there. Look at what's happening with the people that we pay our taxes to. Look at Asia, at Cambodia. There was bombing going on for years after the Vietnam War was supposedly over. They weren't bombing trees. They weren't bombing ditches. I think of my people, the ones I left behind in Mississippi, and *all* the people in *all* the Mississippis. We are a part of each other, you know. Those problems used to affect me individually, directly, and now they affect me indirectly. When one person is hurt, it hurts me too. When I see their condition, I know what they feel, and I feel it, and it hurts.

Have the blues taken on any new meaning for you? Do you feel the same when singing and playing as you did then?

My blues mean *more* to me now than it did then, because in the early years, sure, I wanted other people to like what I was doing. But at times, I was singing for my own personal amusement. A lot of times I'd get it in my mind that nobody understood me, to be honest with you. A lot of times, the people were there, but they really *weren't* there. The *bodies* were there, but I didn't think they were *with* me. And whenever I felt like that, I would go ahead and sing to amuse myself. I'd close my eyes and visualize all of those beautiful people out there enjoying themselves. But as I kept playing and years started to pass, I started thinking a little different from that. I started to feel that it was my *job* to make people interested in what I was doing, to make them be *able* to understand what I was doing, to make them see that I wasn't just teasing, that I was really for real, you know. And this took a while to do, and it takes time today too.

In purely artistic terms, do you relate to your music any differently?

Yes, it's more of a creative art form now. Before, when I made a record I really didn't think that that's exactly what it is—a record of what you're doing and who you are on that day. And once it's out, it stays. I'm much more conscious of that.

What do you do differently?

It's not just music. It's kind of like a selling job, public relations. Sometimes audiences don't pay attention unless you present it a certain way. No matter how good it is, you seem to need to put a catchy title on it. A lot of people, especially blacks, won't like it if you call it blues, but if you go ahead and play it and call it a different name, they'll like it. That's the truth. So the blues are more important artistically, and also because I feel that I've got a message that should be heard.

What's your message?

Well, here I am. I'm trying to work. I'm trying to bring people together. I'm trying to get people to see that we *are* our brother's keeper. So there are many, many things that go along with it. I still work at it.

You once deliberately chose a spot to perform that was located between black and white neighborhoods of a small Mississippi town so as to draw a racially mixed audience.

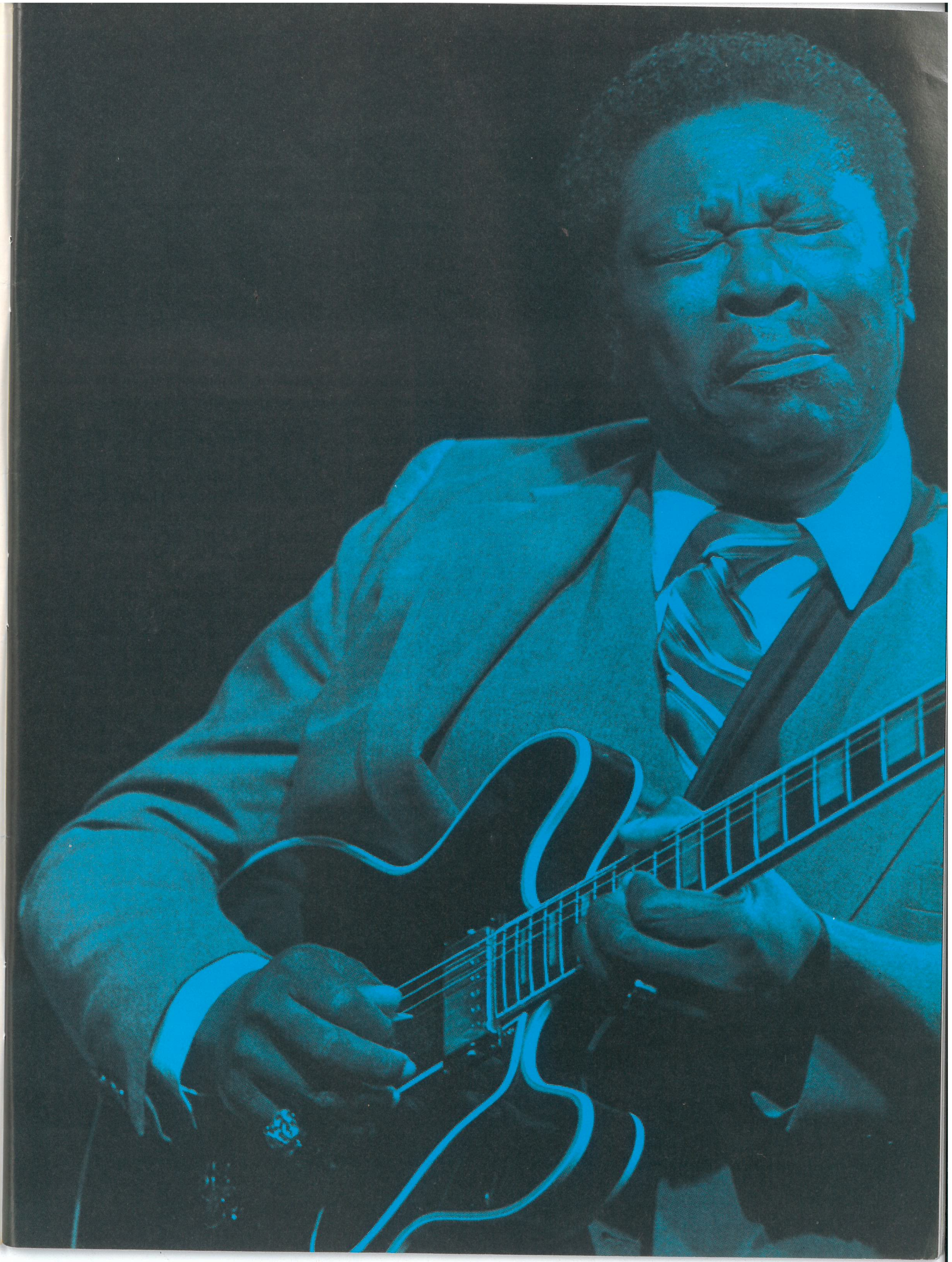
Yeah, I got 'em all. We never would have had any segregation if people would've had enough music around. If musicians from all around the world could get together, country to country, that would be a good thing. Like when I toured the Soviet Union in March of '79, the other people who got together thought about politics, but the American and Russian musicians didn't think about anything but music. It was a tremendous experience.

Do you find that your goal of using music in order to bring people together is a common attitude in the entertainment business?

Yeah, I think most of us are doing it. As musicians we feel that if we can get people together just on a social level, having fun, then they can go ahead and get to know each other in other ways too. They can discuss their differences. We get them together and then something good can come from it, because that's when people start communicating.

What brought about your recognition on an international scale?

That has to do with many things, like the changing of times, like the marching, and like the people getting together and trying to stamp out prejudice and all of the many, many things. It seemed to bring people together. It started out to make people think, to see that everybody had something to offer, and that if you listen carefully you could learn something from others. People started searching for the truth . . . while I've been diggin' all this time. Black awareness—there was a time if you called me



RIGHT PHOTO: JON SEIVERT

he's just B.B.

> **"I'm influenced by anybody that I hear. I don't think that I've ever heard anybody play something that didn't intrigue me at one time or another."**

black, it was insulting [*nods*], oh yeah, insulting. In Mississippi we always did call white people white people but we, as a whole, really didn't want to be called black. We felt that at the time it was degrading, because it seemed that the person calling you black was really saying *more* than what they said. But later on we started to think about it. If the Indian is a red man, and the Chinese is a yellow man, and you're a white man, then why *not* be a black man? Everybody got aware and became proud of the fact that we are what we are. We began to feel that we *did* have something to be proud of. Like when James Brown made "I'm Black And I'm Proud," this really hit a lot of us, and I think all of this has to do with the blues. There was a time when we felt that nobody else had dirty clothes in the closet, you know—the troubles of life. We were sort of made to feel like we were the only ones that had dirty clothes in the closet, and anytime somebody said something to us or about us, we always felt that we should close the door and not let 'em know what we had in the closet.

And that finally began to change?

Yes. After the early '60s and all that, it's a funny thing, we come to find out that *everybody* has dirty clothes in the closet, and if the people in Nashville and Kentucky can be proud of bluegrass music—which is real music about the way they live, and about their problems, and their happiness and all—why *not* be proud of the blues? This kind of transition caused people to recognize the blues singers. Even the people who don't dig blues come up to me and say that they respect what I'm doing.

Many guitar players discovered you by reading comments by Eric Clapton, Mike Bloomfield, and your other musical descendants.

I talked in terms of black people. Now, as far as the white part of it is concerned, when the Beatles came out, they started people to listening again. See, when Elvis came out in '54, they'd scream—*yaahhh*, you know. They never did hear half of the lyrics. If you could move or shake a bit, if you could twist a bit, rock and roll, that was it. Even though the Beatles' fans used to yell their heads off, their songs said something. People listened again for lyrics. All of this seemed to come back, to be re-imported, in a manner of speaking, because I heard many Beatles tunes that had been recorded by some of the blacks over here. They were re-imported with a different sound. Then Michael Bloomfield, Elvin Bishop, Eric Clapton, and quite a few of the other guys had been listening to myself, Muddy Waters, and many others. *Their* followers started getting inquisitive about their playing, and they said that they had listened to me. That's when the white youth started listening to us. And then another thing: The white youth never did have to feel, say, inferior when they were listening to blues, because they never did have to go through the thing that a lot of the young blacks did—things that made them feel that blues was really degrading to them.

Do you ever get a chance to jam with some of the younger musicians whose careers you've influenced so greatly?

Jamming is something that I rarely do, but we have done it, yes. I have jammed with some of the guys that say they idolize me, but most times I'm rarely around them, or if I am it's just for a short time, like playing the same job. But who knows about the future?

Did you ever jam with Jimi Hendrix?

Yes, we all jammed together at a place called the New Generation in New York City. Any guitar player in town would usually get off work long before us, so they'd come by to see if I was really like someone had told them I was. Everybody would have their guitar out, ready to cut me, you know [*laughs*]. Jimi was one of the front-runners.

Do you ever listen to any of the guitarists who have become famous by playing a style that was originally derived from you? Do you ever find that you are influenced by their playing?

Actually, I'm influenced by anybody that I hear. I don't think that I've ever heard anybody play something that didn't intrigue me at one time or another. If they have been influenced by me, I still find that they have put *their* feelings into what they did, and my things which have influenced them sound different when they come out again. There's only been a few guys that if I could play just like them I would. T-Bone Walker was one, Lonnie Johnson was another. Blind Lemon, Charlie Christian, and Django Reinhardt: Those were the only guys I ever heard—well, there's Barney Kessel, and Kenny Burrell [*laughs*]. If I could have played just like them—not today, but when I first heard them—I would have. And there are also things that they do today that if I *could* do, I probably would, but not the way that they did it. Instead of playing it *A, B, C, D*, I'd probably play it *A, C, D, B*—not the exact same thing, because I think that there are very few people that play the same ideas identically as you would feel it yourself.

How long have you been using semi-solid, thin-body guitars?

Since the first one I saw, about '58. I have been using Gibson ES-355s for a long time because they're stereo and I like the highs. I can't hear lows too well—my ears don't tell me much—but highs I can hear very well. My new guitar, which Gibson is planning to release as the Lucille model, is sort of like a 355 but with a few changes.

How has it been modified?

It has a closed body with no f-holes, so you don't get the feedback. I used to have to put towels in my 355 to cut down the resonance, but

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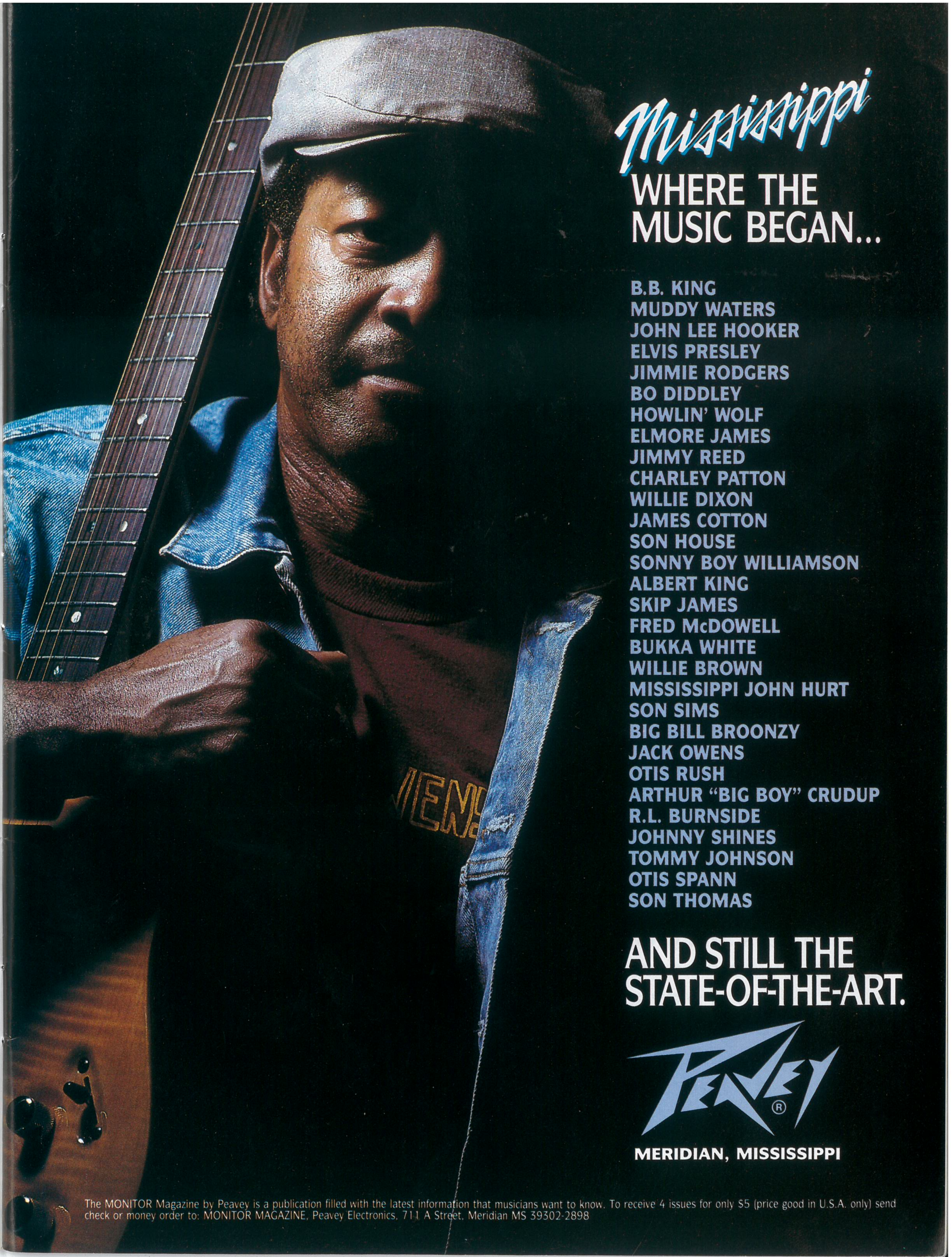

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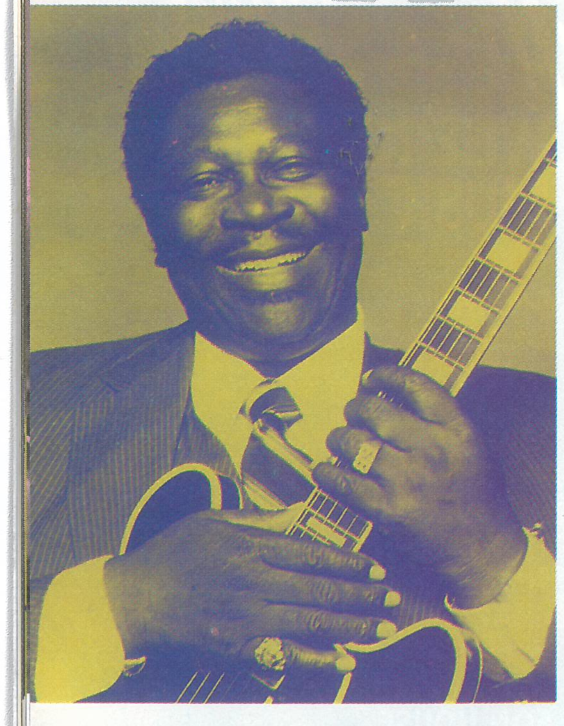


"I guess by being a Virgo, I'm a little sarcastic sometimes, so I said, 'Well, how long is your station on the air?' He said 12 hours. And I said, 'And you play a whole hour of blues?' He says, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Well look, why be so nice to us blues singers and give us a whole hour? Why not play a record or two during them other 11 hours?'"

with the new Lucille I can crank right up. Also, I can tune the tailpiece [a Gibson TP-6] at the back. I usually wear sleeves most of the time, and on the other tailpiece, because of where the strings were wound, I always snagged my sleeves or I'd wind up hurting my hand a little. With this one my sleeve doesn't get caught, and when I cup right on the bridge, it doesn't hit the end of the windings so I don't hang up my sleeve and I don't hurt my hand. Also, the neck is a little bit thinner.

What kind of circuit does it have?

There's a Y cord that lets me bypass the stereo.

Which pickup do you use?

I usually go through the stereo circuitry, with both pickups working against each other. With just a quick shift of the hand I can set the volume or change the tone. To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure which pickup does what. I just put them both on and use my ear.

Did you ever use the vibrato tailpiece on the 355?

No. I think the reason people came out with vibrato tailpieces was because they were trying to duplicate the sound that I was getting with my left hand, and they forgot that I don't need it [*laughs*]. I always took the handle off. The new guitar is really something. I can't put it down, and it has really got me wanting to play again, just like when I started.

Have you had many guitars over the years?

Yes. I was in an accident once, and the insurance company gave me a Gretsch, and then I was in another accident and that one got busted up, and they gave me an Epiphone. Somebody *stole* that. Then I got some Gibsons, and about four of them got busted up. I've been in about 16 accidents. On the 13th or 14th one, an accident right outside of Shreveport, Louisiana, I remember seeing the bone in my right arm. They took me to the hospital and sewed it up, and the doctor told me that I nearly lost the use of the arm because of some nerve in there. But we drove to Dallas, and I played that night with my left hand. I still made the job.

Weren't you also injured in Israel?

Yes, I fell about nine feet and messed up the side of my face and my shoulder, and busted a blood vessel in my left hand. My teeth went right through my lip—seven more stitches. But I went swimming that evening in the Dead Sea. I couldn't miss it, man, because we were sold out in Jerusalem. The Holy City—I *had* to make that!

What kind of strings and picks do you use?

I use Gibson's 740XL set, with the .009 for the first string. I use a fairly stiff pick. Sometimes it's hard to get good amplifiers, and since I almost always play only with down-strokes, I find that I don't have to hit the strings quite as hard with a stiff pick to get the volume I want.

What kind of amplifiers do you prefer?

Whatever the promoters set up for us ahead of time on the road. I used to request Gibson SG amps, and the second choice was a Fender. Lately I've been trying the Gibson Lab Series amps, and I think we'll be using them from now on.

Of your own records, which ones do you think are the best? Any favorite solos?

I've never made a perfect record, never. Although I'm not ashamed of any of them, there's always something that I could have done better. I know the critics always mention *Live And Well* or *Live At The Regal*, but I think that *Indianola Mississippi Seeds* was the best album I've done artistically.

How seriously were you criticized for using strings and pop songs and more sophisticated chord progressions on some of the recent albums?

I have had some people that weren't thinking. They'd come up and say something about it, but they didn't realize that I was using strings in the early '50s, with things like "My Heart Belongs To Only You," "How Do I Love You," "The Keys To My Kingdom," and quite a few things like that. We were using strings long before "The Thrill Is Gone," many years before. But those critics didn't say much about that. They thought that you were being Mr. Big or you were being jazzy. My answer is this: If the song needs just a guitar and me singing, we use that, and if you need something else to make it, then you should use that. Whether it be a full orchestra or just a harmonica and guitar—whatever's needed, that's what you should use, though I don't think that one should put a lot of stuff in there just to put it in there.

Were you criticized when you decided to have a large stage band with nine or ten pieces?

I have been criticized, yes, but again, a lot of the people who are criticizing didn't know that I had a big band back in the early '50s. It's a great thing to have a big sound from time to time. Years ago, Blood, Sweat & Tears and Chicago showed that if you've got a good band, a band that shouts and plays well, you can get a great thing going. Count Basie and them—that's all they did. They'd swing you to death, man, they'd swing you crazy, and I've always liked that.

What do you look for in a musician who comes to work for you?

A man. I look for a man first, and a musician second. I must respect what he has to offer. I wouldn't say that a guy that can really blow the roof off a building is necessarily the best musician. He may be fiery; he's the type of guy that can really move an audience in a hurry. But an audience don't like to stand on its nose all the time. They want to get down and be something else from time to time. Then you've got another guy that has a touch when he's playing that can really move people, like in a slow groove. Well, you don't want *that* all night. Each guy is good for his one particular thing. Everybody in my group is behind me to push me. I need their cooperation. But I look for someone who's 100% man. If he's only 50% musician, that's okay; we'll turn him into 75% musician after a while. But if he is not 100% man, there's nothing I can do.

Do you have much of a problem with discipline, members not showing up on time and so forth?

I've had guys in the band that screwed up from time to time, but I feel kind of like their father or uncle, and unless they do it very bad I won't do anything to them. I may fine them today and give it back tomorrow. They can tell you such fantastic lies: "Man, the *train*, like, came by, and one of the cars ran off the track, man, and they wouldn't *allow* nobody to come across." So I laugh, and if he doesn't screw up tomorrow I don't say anything about it. All of the guys are very good musicians and very dependable. I've been fortunate to have dependable men. But I got a thing: Three days of screwing up in a week's time, and you're out. No more fines. So these guys are cool. I tell them that if I can make it, so can they.

You've toured the world and worked 300 nights a year for over three decades. What is the source of your strength and energy?

You've asked me a hard question. I guess one thing is that when I first became popular and started going to many, many places, I always felt kind of bad about stopping school in the tenth grade. I always felt that I wanted to be able to talk to people everywhere I went, to really participate in whatever was around. As I moved about, I found then that my education was really far off. I started learning how much I didn't know. That was one of the reasons why I *really* started to push myself, and I've done it through the years. Sometimes a lot of people wouldn't expect a blues singer to know certain things, and I *do* know them. I won't mention them, being a Virgo, but it just knocks me out for people to cut me short, thinking that I may not know. I work a lot of times just to have that little bit of pleasure. That might not sound like very much, but to me it kind of knocks me out for people to think, okay, the B. didn't go

"B.B. King sings, and then Lucille sings."

PHOTO: JON SEIVERT

to college or he didn't do this or he didn't do that, and certain things they don't expect me to know—I know *about.* I pay attention, and if I hear something played or hear somebody say something, I'll put it on the tape recorder and listen to it and work with it. I wouldn't say it as he did, but I liked what he was doing and I would do it *this* way, *my* way.

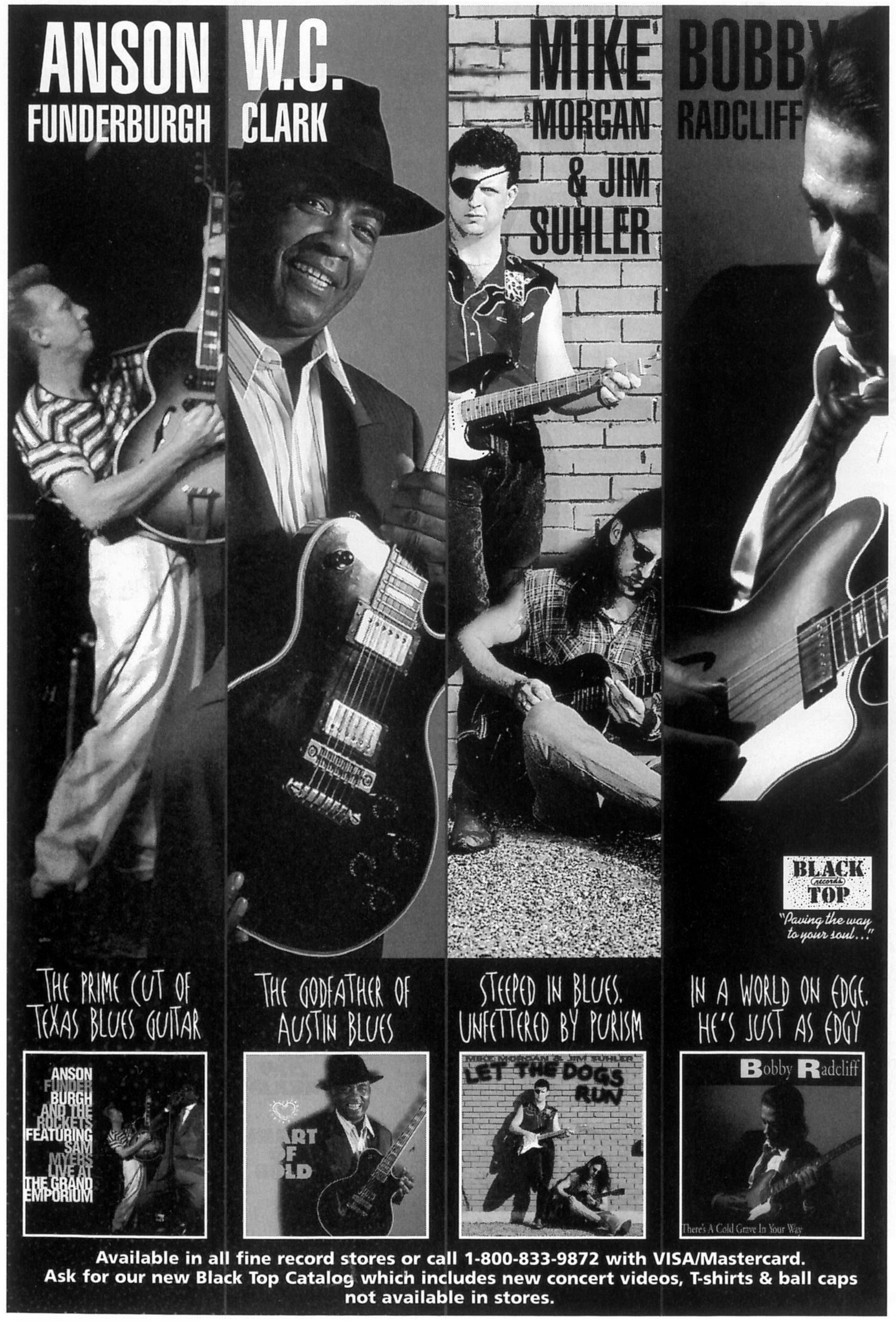
How do you maintain your health and keep up the pace?

It's part of my job. It's like this story about the snake who's lying by the road all cold and muddy. This guy sees him, picks him up, and takes care of him. He gets home, around the fire, and the snake warms up and pokes his head up and says, "You know what? I ought to bite you." The guy says, "You wouldn't do that. I took care of you." And the snake says, "Yeah, but I'm a snake, and that's my job—I'm *supposed* to bite you!" [*Laughs.*] It's the same with being on the road and keeping up with the schedule. Sometimes it's a part of your job to eat, and sometimes it's a part of your job to get some sleep.

Many people call you the King of the Blues. Does that change your outlook on your work or make you feel obligated in some way?

Well, I guess I look at it both ways. First, I never think of myself as King of the Blues; I happen to be a guy named B.B. King, and he plays the blues. Of course, I think I know my job pretty well. What keeps my feet on the ground is that there are people who haven't had the popularity that I've had who are just as talented, or even more so, some of them. But I have so many young fans now, white and black, that come up to me. They trust me; they have faith. You know how it is when you do something and it's appreciated by your girlfriend or your father or mother or whoever it may be. You can see it in their eyes. I can't explain it; it's a feeling that I can't tell you about. You have to see for yourself to know. Maybe like your little brother or your daughter or your son, maybe even like your pet, your little puppy or something. When you look at them, there's something that *tells* you—I know it seems a little deep, and it's hard to explain—but you know that this pet or this person or whoever is really serious about what you've done.

I wish I knew the words—now I'm really at a loss. You're hurting when you can't say what you really want, but there are times when no one else can tell you that they dig you like this special person can. This feeling has happened to me as a musician through the years. It's made me think a lot of times when I go out on the stage and guys come up and want to play guitar with me. You can look in their eyes, the young musicians, and know that you have been something that's going to help them go much further than probably what they would have without you. It's like seeing your own children or your neighbor's children. You don't want to mess up, and this makes you really buckle down and try to do it a little better. I look at my own kids sometimes, and my nephews and nieces. They won't say it around me, but I can tell that they've been whispering, "That's my daddy! That's *my* daddy!" That within itself is enough to make me really go out and try to do better. I try and live and be a certain way so that each day I meet a person, they can't help but say, well, he's just B.B. King. And that's all.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In the nearly half-century since B.B. King traded the muddy fields of Mississippi for a guitar and an endless highway, his lyrical phrasing, stinging attack, and inimitable vibrato have become integral to the lexicon of modern blues. It's often been said that B.B. tells a better story with one note than most people do with a hundred, and you'd be hard pressed to find a blues guitarist that hasn't borrowed from B.B.'s bag of tricks.

King's inspiration to rise above the poverty and oppression of the South was fueled listening to horn players, pianists, singers, and *especially* guitarists such as Lonnie Johnson, Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, and T-Bone Walker.

Listening to the Legends

Best of Guitar Player recently had the opportunity to spin some records for B.B. and talk with him about his influences, idols, and peers. This interview was conducted backstage before his show at Northern California's Concord Pavilion. B.B. only heard portions of each song that were played for him, but he correctly identified each artist within moments of hearing their opening riffs. We kicked things off with some early Muddy Waters.

by Art Thompson

PHOTO: HIROYUKI ARAKAWA

Listening to the Legends

Muddy Waters, "Rollin' And Tumblin'."

That sounds like Muddy Waters.

When did you first hear this kind of music?

Before I left Mississippi. Not too much after I got to Memphis.

Would you call it a direct line back to the earliest blues?

That I've heard, yeah. You know, Henry Ford built the Model Ts and Model As and all that, and today we have the Lincolns. But they're still all built on the same chassis. That's the same thing we do today. We hop 'em up a bit, add a little something here and there, but overall they're the same things.

Muddy Waters

Buddy Guy, "The First Time I Met The Blues."

That's Buddy. I know him. Great guitarist and one of the nicest guys in the business. When I first met him, he was with Muddy Waters. Buddy is a fantastic person. We need more people like him and Robert Cray and Eric Johnson. Great musicians, great human beings, it's just great to be around them. They do what I would like to do—if they can't say something good, then they don't say nothin'. Even if you wasn't playin', you'd want to learn to play just by being around these guys.

In the early days, did Buddy view you as his competition?

No. He was himself. I think all of us have had idols. I saw one of mine night before last—Lowell Fulson. I'm crazy about Lowell, Roy Brown, T-Bone Walker. I like jazz, so there's Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, and definitely, I was crazy about Lonnie Johnson. Robert [*Johnson*] was okay. In fact, today I guess we would say that Robert was like the leader in blues, but he wasn't my idol. Lonnie Johnson was my idol. But all these guys was great. So I think Buddy may have liked me, but he took his thing and went his way. I liked T-Bone Walker and all these other people, but I could never play like any of them. What I did was try to copy what I could. If I could have played like them I would have. But since I couldn't, or was too lazy to try, I found myself doing my own thing and saying to myself, "I sure like what he did, but if I could do it, I'd do it this way." And I think that Buddy and a lot of other guys did the same thing. They took the things that they liked and used it to their own way.

There's certainly a lot of T-Bone in your playing.

Oh, of course. I wish you could hear more. I was crazy about him. [*Laughs.*]

Earl Hooker, "Blue Guitar."

[*Listens intently.*] That have to be Earl Hooker. Ain't but two people that can do that to me—Earl Hooker and Bonnie Raitt.

What kind of a guy was Hooker?

He was shy. People don't talk about him as much as they should, because he did a heck of a lot for this business. Most of the time I knew him he was sickly with tuberculosis. He would never get cured. He would go in the hospital and stay awhile, and get bored and come out. He loved to play. I never seen him drink or nothin'—I guess he couldn't because of his illness. But I must have known him 10 or 12 years, and the whole time I knew him he had this sickness. But he still was a *fabulous* musician, and just quiet, quiet. Just look at him and you would never believe he played.

Was Hooker the first blues guitarist to use effects?

He tried many different things, but I wouldn't say he was the first. I've heard other guys do it, but he was one of the first to perfect it to where he could make it do what he wanted. He was the best on that. But prior to that, would you believe that one of the other guys that nobody talks about, 'cause to me, he's a great guitarist, is Ike Turner? First guy that I saw doing a whole lot of that was Ike Turner—even before Earl Hooker.

You met Ike when he was a kid, right?

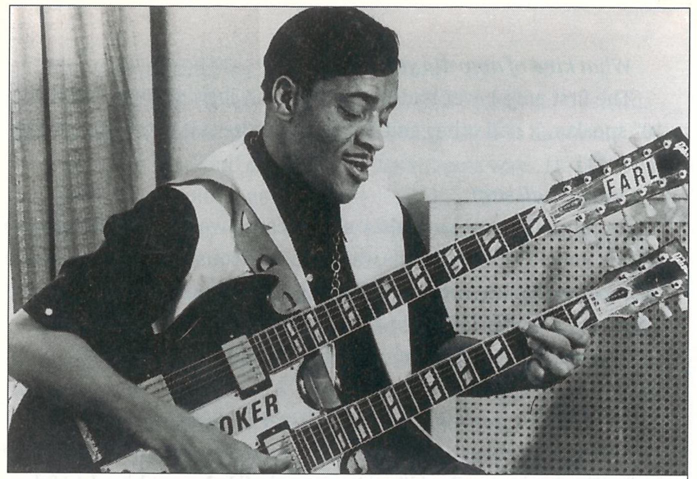
Sixteen. Another one of my old buddies. [*Laughs.*]

I haven't heard much about him lately.

He did some time, but he's out now and he looks well. He was at the opening of my new club the other night. There's nobody in the world badder than he for putting a band or an act together. I think he got a bad rap. I don't think that they treated him right in the movie and some of the other places. Some of it he probably was guilty, but not of all of the things that they said, and nobody seems to pay any attention to that. Recognizing talent is not something everybody do. Ike does—he recognizes and works with it, and if anybody tells me that he didn't do anything to help Tina, I tell 'em they don't know what they're talking about.

Did Hooker's tone ever make you want to try effects?

No. I liked him. Crazy about his playing. If I could have played slide, I would have. But no. You know, other than the people I mentioned that was in my early influences—like Lonnie Johnson. . . . Lonnie had a way of phrasing. Blind Lemon had it, Charlie Christian had it, Django Reinhardt had it, Louis Jordan, Johnny Hodges, and Buddy Hackett had it on saxophone. Singers like Roy Brown and a few others had it—I can hear it in their voices. Now if you ask me what it is, I can't tell you, but it's a way of taking your time and placing it. . . . [*Pauses for a moment.*] Think of a 12" rule and being able to put your finger on exactly six inches and divide it in half, when you want to. And then when you don't want to, divide it into three's. Right on it—not slide up to that point. Am I making some sense to you? Well in my head, when I'm playing, I don't always see that 12" rule, but there comes a spot somewhere in there where you should put your mark. Now if you miss, you've got to wait until you find it again. That's why I play so slow sometimes—'cause I miss a lot of them. [*Laughs.*] But that to me is where it's most effective.



Earl Hooker

It's the anticipation?

Yeah. Now if you played it, played it, played it, played it, played it—sure, good—it shows you're fast and you know your instrument, but it doesn't always tell the story. That's what I'm always interested in—my story being told. Like talkin'. I don't talk fast because I used to stutter and stammer so much when I was young. Now to get a person to try to understand, I try to get their attention. Try and get their attention and let 'em go in my head.

Your guitar voice has remained remarkably consistent through the years, but you can certainly hear differences.

I think I know what you're talking about, but I think of that the same as you do an old piano sitting over there in the corner. If Ray Charles is playing it, he's going to sound like Ray Charles. If Elton John plays it, he sounds like Elton John. Oscar Peterson's going to sound like Oscar Peterson. I think it's the same thing with the guitar. Each one of us have that same identity. Some of us are, thank God, lucky enough to bring it out, and some are not. But nevertheless, they still look themselves when they play.

Charlie Christian, "Solo Flight."

[*Laughs.*] That's Charlie Christian—Benny Goodman's orchestra. I was crazy about him too.

Do you remember when Benny brought Charlie into his band?

He was the first guy to integrate—made a hell of a difference. That's another man that knew talent and knew how to put it together. Turn that up again. [*Listens.*] Ain't nobody been able to put diminished chords together like Charlie—since or before. Thank you.

When did you first hear Charlie?

I was a kid—a teenager.

Wasn't he also a teen?

Yeah, but he was just so far advanced. It's like a lot of teens you see today. You hear 'em now and you come back in two years and they're *burnin'*. They're taking your head off on guitar. Be like this little kid from Australia, Nathan Cavaleri—he is terrific.

Lowell Fulson, "San Francisco Blues."

Lowell Fulson. [*Laughs.*]

Made a big impression on you?

Oh yeah, still does. See Lowell's not much older than I am, but he was talented like Charlie Christian when he was very young. I was crazy about him, still is. As far as the real blues is concerned, he's not only a great blues singer, he's a hell of a writer. Writes some of the best blues songs ever been.

What kinds of things did you pick up from Lowell?

He is the one that inspired me to do "Everyday I Have The Blues." He didn't do it fast when he first did it. I first heard Memphis Slim do it. He wrote it, but he did it slow. I heard Lowell Fulson do it, and then I heard Joe Williams do it with a band out of Chicago—just before he did it with Count Basie. Lowell had a good slow shuffle [*taps his leg and sings*]: "Everyday, everyday I have the blues." And then he had the horn moanin' in the back and Lloyd Glen playing piano—that was the greatest thing I'd ever heard. So then I wanted to do it. Maxwell Davis did an arrangement for me [*sings faster*]: "Everyday, da da, da daa, everyday I have the. . . ." So we had a hit on it. And then Joe Williams come back again with Count Basie and that big band. Ain't nobody did it since—that was it.

But your version stuck.

Well it stays. But you know, I think a lot of that is what we listen to. There are so many people out there today that are selling millions of records. Rock and roll groups, some of them I never knowed, and they're number one, number two, the Top Ten, and I've never even heard of them. Me, I don't listen to the radio much—I buy a bunch of CDs and pick the ones that I want. I'll take a cut off of number one, one off of CD number five—the cuts that I like—and I put them on my DAT. That's what I listen to. So when the radio and videos are being played, I listen to this.

You donated thousands of your records to the Blues Archive.

To old Miss, yes.

Which ones did you keep?

I didn't keep any of those. I was a little sorry though, because some of the things I donated, I can't find no more. But I went and bought a lot of them again on CD, the ones I could find. I guess I've spent thousands of dollars on CDs. My accountant and my manager hate for me to go into a record store. [*Laughs.*] Now it's easy because you can get CDs without all that packaging. You can get thousands of dollars worth

Lowell Fulson

TOP PHOTO: CHRIS STACHWITZ

of CDs and only come out with a little basket full.

Sonny Boy Williamson II, "From The Bottom."

Sonny Boy.

You're playing on this track.

I did one thing with him, but I'd forgotten what it was. It was on the Trumpet label in Jackson, Mississippi.

The recording date was November 12, 1954.

I don't remember too much about the session, but I was thinking I was pretty good then. It was some years after I'd been trying to play. I can hear myself. It sounds a lot like my first record on Bullet out of Knoxville.

Sonny Boy Williamson

You were pretty hot for a young guy.

[*Laughs.*] Well, okay.

When I first heard that cut I didn't know who it was. It's terrible, you know, to hear yourself for the first time. At that time I'd never heard myself on record.

Really?

Yeah. So when I heard it I wanted to know when they were going to play mine. They told me, "Hell, that's you fool." [*Laughs.*] Then from that time I guess I sort of learned my own identity.

How did you record back then?

Everybody laid down their parts at the same time. If you made a mistake, you had to do the whole thing over until you got it right. Today, you know, you've got 32 tracks and all that. One guy screw up and you make him go back and do his part again. But at that time you had but one track. You may have had five or six mikes, but they all go into one.

What kind of amp did you use?

The first amp I ever had was a Gibson. A little gray Gibson with a 10" speaker. It had tubes and it was about the size of your bag there. [*Laughs.*]

Pretty small stuff.

But to us that was somethin' else because we hadn't been used to electric guitars. My first Lucille was a Gibson acoustic with a DeArmond pickup. It was about two-thirds the length of this one [*points at Lucille*]. I mean neck and all. [*Laughs.*]

Did you have feedback problems with your first archtops?

No.

Why did you have Gibson make you an ES-355 without f-holes?

I like it better like that because there's not a lot of moving inside the body. That's why Les Paul liked it so much. I'd always thought of that, but Les came out with it first.

Does it help the sustain?

No. I could take your guitar and sustain it as long as I want. It depends on the amplifier you've got. If you got a little guts in your amp, you can always find a certain spot. It gets back to that same thing I was telling you about, that 12" rule. You can always find somewhere between one and 12, like a frequency on your radio.

The sweet spot?

Uh huh. Everybody doesn't know that I guess. [*Laughs.*] That's something I learned without somebody teaching me.

Elmore James, "The Sky Is Cryin."

[*Listens for a moment.*] Elmore James. I knew him, but I didn't know him that well. He looked like a blues player. He didn't act or look like a lot of the guys—when you see him or be around him, you knew he was a musician. The difference between him and Sonny Boy was that Sonny Boy was tall and real like a star kind of guy. [*Raises his voice.*] "Yeah, I'm here and you better know that."

I've heard Sonny Boy was a pretty rough character.

I guess you could say that because he liked to drink. But Elmore, on the other hand, was more of a gentleman. Not that social of a person, but Sonny Boy was whatever came. [*Laughs.*] I mean if you ready to fight, let's do it.

Didn't he once shoot a man?

Well, they tell a lot of stories on him, but he was a guy that liked to drink. The way he came up on plantations and roadhouses, he had to be kind of tough because there was a lot of roughnecks around where he was going. The way they used to tell me, "If you start it, we'll end it." [*Laughs.*] I always wanted to stay out of that kind of stuff, and I think Elmore James was the same.

Onstage, was Elmore anything like Hendrix?

He played a lot, but I don't see him as Hendrix. To me he wasn't as active as Muddy Waters. Once he was playing though, he was good, and you knew it was him. He was a good singer as well. But Muddy Waters had that talent. See, most of the blues singers back when I was growing up, they could get your attention and hold it. Muddy was really one. Elmore was kind of that way—but to me, he wasn't as electrifying as Muddy. So that would make him a little different than Hendrix. See Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and a few like that, when they get in it, they are just there and gone. They don't come up for air, they keep flowing, flowing, flowing. I think Elmore was a little different until he started the slide—that was different. Then he may have been more of a Hendrix.

Albert King, "I'll Play The Blues For You."

That's Albert. [*Pauses to listen.*] Oh, he made some good records—darn good records. Albert never got his recognition as he should have because Albert was kind of like Sonny Boy in some ways. He didn't take too kindly for compliments, and sometimes didn't seem to go out of his way to get them. Me, I kind of enjoy being patted on the head sometimes.

Did Freddie and Albert tell people they were related to you?

No. None of us are related. Friends of course, but not related. Freddie was Freddie King, but Albert was Albert Nelson. I guess all of us wished we could have been. I used to call Albert my big brother, and he'd call me the same sometimes. In reality, we were not related, but I wish we had been.

Were you ever influenced by Albert's horn arrangements?

No, his horns never influenced me none. On my very first record I had horns—very first one. So this was before these kids was born. You're talking about the Memphis Horns that played with Albert—they weren't born yet. [*Laughs.*]

T-Bone Walker's?

Not T-Bone's horns or band—except Maxwell Davis. Maxwell did a lot of things back in that time, a lot of arrangements. You know what band I was crazy about was Count Basie—I loved 'em.

That's the sound you were aiming for?

Wished I could have it today. Loved it, still love it. There was some small bands that I liked, but I've always liked big bands from the beginning.

When did you make your first record?

People quite often say '49, but it was made in the latter part of '48. That's when I first recorded for Bullet Record And Transcription Company. I recorded at the studio where I worked at [radio station] WDIA. We did four sides: "How Do You Feel When Your Baby Packs Up To Go," "Take A Swing With Me," "I Got The Blues," and "Miss Martha King." We did that at studio A. I did it with a guy named Tuff Green. It was Tuff Green's band and Tuff was the bass player. In his band was Phineas Newborn Jr., the great jazz piano player. He was too young at the time to have a Musicians Union card; he had to have a students card. His brother Calvin played guitar, and he's a great jazz guitarist today. Well, those two was on my record and their father played drums. His name was Phineas, but we called him Fine-us.

Tuff Green's band played all over. I don't know how to tell you, but they was a band that was so good that they made a name for themselves not recording. That's how good they were. And then later on I met Ike Turner and then later the Bihari brothers and started recording with them out in California. Their key man was Maxwell Davis which was the best blues arranger I ever met. Ike and I both come from Mississippi. Ike's from around Clarksdale and I'm from Indianola, about 45 miles different.

So your roots and Ike's are the same.

He's just a better musician. I wish to hell I could have been as great a musician as he was. If I could put things together like he did—like he *does*—he still do. He was really great.

Robert Nighthawk, "Maxwell Street Medley."

Sounds like Robert Nighthawk. Are my ears still pretty good? [*Laughs.*] He was the first one of the so-called "modern" bottleneck guitarists. To me, he was the first one.

Was his style a direct link to Tampa Red's?

I would think so because Tampa Red was way, way before Robert Nighthawk. Tampa Red played a kazoo. I liked what he did—I wasn't crazy about the kazoo—but I loved his singing and his playing. But I guess that was his trademark. It would be like what we used to do at home. We used to take a regular hair comb and put paper on it, and it'd sound similar to a kazoo.

Doesn't every kid do that?

Now you just blew my thing—I thought only we were the ones. [*Laughs.*]

Was Earl Hooker part of the Nighthawk/Tampa connection?

Yeah, I would think Earl learned from Robert. You know, Ike Turner used to play with Robert Nighthawk. He was young when he played with him.

Really?

Oh God, Ike Turner, man—you hear Pinetop Perkins? Ike was doin' a lot of his stuff when he was a teenager. Dancing and playing—Ike Turner was the best. Now he's great on guitar, but nothing like piano playing and arranging. Not from books, but just puttin' together, "You play so and so, you play so and so," he just knew. He still does; there's some people that can.

Did Robert Nighthawk play with his fingers?

He used. . . . A lot of them used thumbpicks and the fingerpicks like the electric steel uses.

Country style.

Well, what was first? Country before the city, wasn't it? [*Laughs.*] Wasn't too many of them that used a plectrum. The reason I like a plectrum was because of Les Paul and the first guy that I saw using them—Nick Maniloff. He sold guitar instruction books out of a catalog called Sears Roebuck. Today, everybody know it as Sears. They would always show the plectrum, and they'd claim that you could get any sound with it. I believed it until I heard Wes Montgomery played with one. [*Laughs.*] After I heard him play, I knew they didn't have it right.

Lonnie Johnson, "Guitar Blues."

That's Lonnie Johnson, I can tell you that. [*Laughs.*]

Eddie Lang is also on this cut.

I hear Eddie, but I also hear Lonnie. Lonnie's playing lead on it. Eddie was great, but he wasn't no Lonnie Johnson to me. I liked Eddie because he played folk-like music and he gave Lonnie a break. He would never have been able to do that had it not been for Eddie. A lot of people didn't know he was white—we did. We liked him, but Lonnie to me was like a lot of the guys today; he was just a leader at what he did. Eddie didn't just play blues, he played everything. Lonnie was mostly known for his blues playing. Believe it or not, what you practice most is what you excel at. There are some people, like Bonnie Raitt, she can play anything and sound good at it. There are a lot of others I can't name that can do the same—but *I* can't.

Lightnin' Hopkins, "Short Haired Woman."

That's Lightnin' Hopkins. How many have I missed?

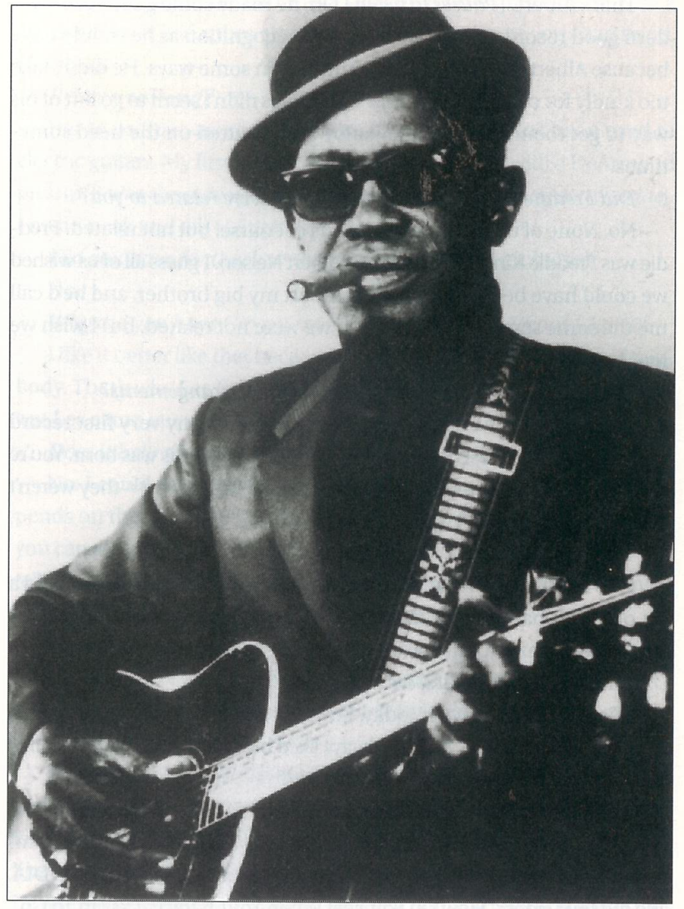
You're 11 for 11.

This sounds like a later cut.

It's from a live performance in '64.

Well, I guess I've cheated a little bit. See, I was a disk jockey for a long time [*Laughs.*] What you're doing now is going to help a lot of kids in the future. I wish to God that I could have known more about my

Lonnie Johnson



Lightnin' Hopkins

idols—like the ones we've been talking about. I've got maybe two pieces of video on T-Bone that I've saved. But Sonny Boy number one, I've never seen him live, and I've never seen anything on him. And that was the one I was crazy about. His name was John Lee Williamson, and everybody called him Sonny Boy. That's the one I was crazy about. That other one we were listening to a while ago [Rice Miller, a.k.a Sonny Boy Williamson II] was great, but the first one was the one I was talking about. Little guy, about the size of John [*Lee Hooker*], stuttered just as bad as John, and he played harmonica. Little Walter came out with a modern version of his harmonica playing—this guy was something else. Now there was a few others that I've never seen. Robert Johnson I only saw one picture of. I'd give a thousand dollars just for a good extra picture. I'd give two thousand for a video, just to see him in action. Recently they came up with one on Django and I got a chance to see about five minutes of Django Reinhardt.

T-Bone Walker, "Strollin' With Bones."

T-Bone Walker. He tells me who he is right off. There's a lot of players I hear that have that sound. You just know who they are. It's like sayin', "Hey, I'm B.B. King." You know who they are because they don't let anything take them away from being themselves. That's what I try not to do. Even the new things you learn, you try your very best at all times to make this be you. I would like to be able to play like him [*points at T-Bone CD*], but I do play it the way I play it, not like you would play it. That was the one thing I liked about John Lee Hooker—you can say what you want, but John Lee is John Lee and he does what John Lee do.

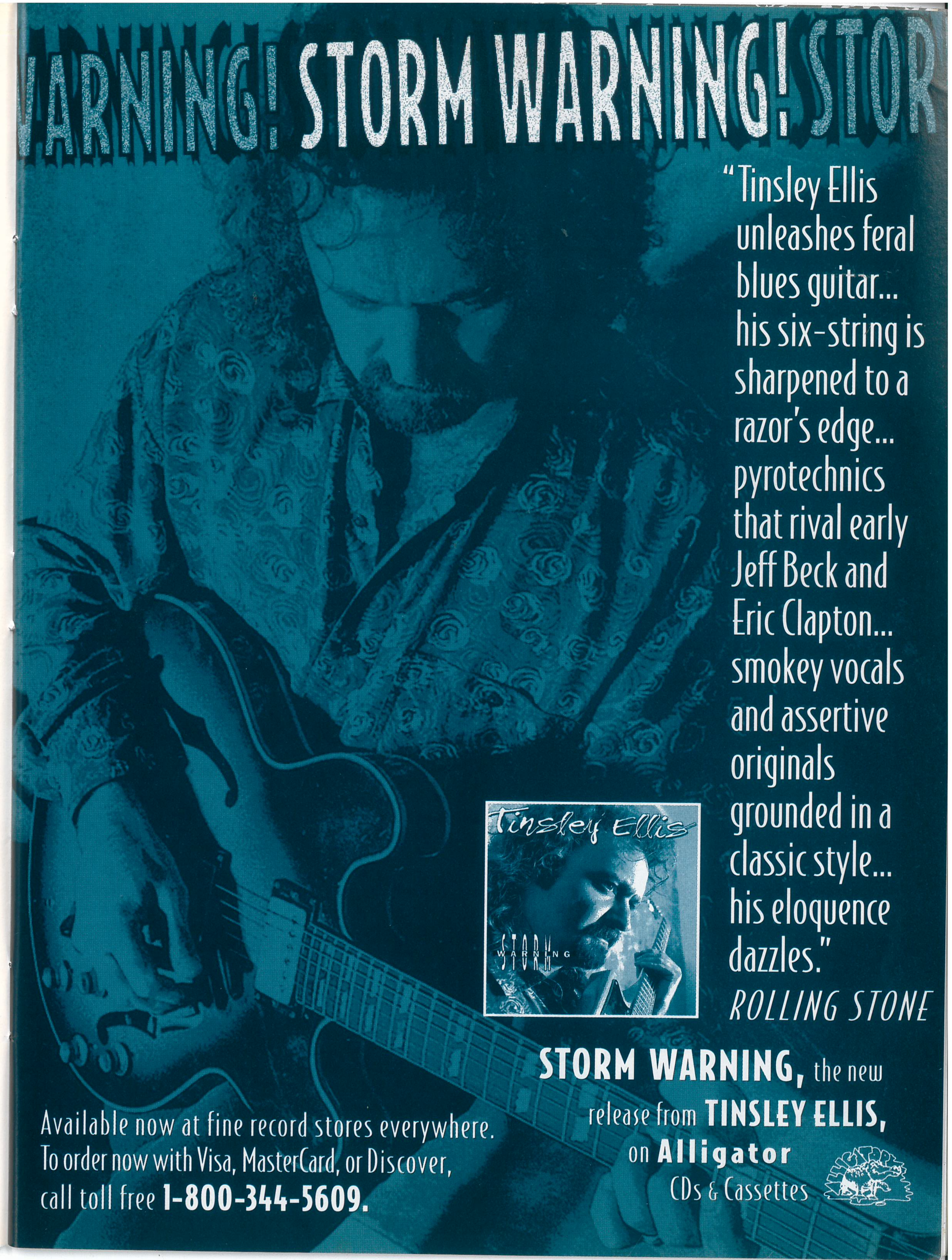
T-Bone was quite the showman wasn't he?

Oh yeah. Now if you're talking about Hendrix, T-Bone was a Jimi Hendrix then. Only difference, he did all kinds of splits, and he would do it nightly. Go all the way down—he was a natural Fred Astair, and he was about the same size.

It's been said that T-Bone burned himself out doing endless one-nighters. What's been the key to your staying power?

People say anything, but the times change, and unless you change with it, it passes you by. People remember you like a person in death. You remember a guy the way he looked the last time you saw him. That's the same as it is with musicians. If I don't change, believe me, music does. And if I don't have something of interest at this time, somebody do have it. I've been a lucky guy. Somehow I've been able to get something in each decade of music that went pretty good. Having a good manager like I have, he suggested certain things. But at times, you do things and your public that loves you will say, "I don't like that—I ain't gonna take it." In order to stay in this business you've got to stay alive. In other words, you've got to be there and people got to know you're there. Very few of my records have ever been played on national TV or radio. "The Thrill Is Gone" is the first one, and then the one I did with U2, "When Love Comes To Town." Only two. Think about kids that gets something on every week or so—now *they're* the lucky ones.

RIGHT PHOTO: COURTESY OF SHOWTIME ARCHIVES (TORONTO)



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the meeting B.B. and the Hook

by Jas Obrecht

John Lee Hooker and B.B. King met at Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, California, during March 1993 to record together for the first time. The session was for B.B.'s *Blues Summit* album, a star-studded affair featuring duets with Ruth Brown, Robert Cray, Albert Collins, Lowell Fulson, Buddy Guy, Etta James, and Koko Taylor. No track comes closer to celebrating B.B.'s Mississippi roots, though, than his mesmerizing "You Shook Me" with the Hook.

While B.B. and John Lee have similar backgrounds—both were raised in the Delta, idolized the same musicians, migrated north, and began recording in the late '40s—their styles are remarkably dissimilar. A master of single-note solos punctuated with his signature hummingbird vibrato, B.B. has typically worked with a jumping, well-rehearsed big band. Much more of a lone wolf, John Lee tends to perform solo or with a small, handpicked band, matching his deep, deep voice with propulsive, trance-inducing rhythms or raucous boogies. Performing together, though, the bluesmen easily found common ground during the "You Shook Me" session. A few weeks later, on April 4th, the B.B. King Band played the Circle Star Theater in San Carlos, California, just a few miles downhill from Mr. Hooker's home. We had just 35 minutes between sets to score the interview and photo shoot. After a thrilling performance before a packed house, B.B. cooled down for a few minutes and then settled into an easy chair alongside the couch where John Lee Hooker was holding court. Their exchange began with a hearty handshake.

PHOTO: BILL REITZEL

the Meeting

"The blues was here when the world was born and man and woman got together. That's called the blues." —John Lee Hooker

B.B.: John, you did me a great favor. I owe you one.

John Lee: Look, B.B., there ain't nothin' in the world . . . I could never give enough to do what I did with you.

B.B.: Same here.

John Lee: All my life, I wanted to sit down with one of the great masters.

B.B.: Oh, listen to that! [*Hitches up pants legs and pretends he's wading.*] Now go ahead, John. [*Both laugh uproariously.*]

John Lee: He's a genius. I been on the stage with him a lot, but this is the first time I recorded with him. That was a pleasure too. I never will forget it as long as I live. We did "She Shook Me, Like The Hurricane Shook The Trees." We played the hell out of that tune.

Was B.B. hard to work with?

John Lee: Just like takin' candy from a baby. I been talkin' about wantin' to do that for years and years. We come up together—I don't want to say how far back—but we were youngsters. We would party, go out together. But something I dreamed of was wantin' to sit down with this man, side to side, face to face, and just play. It was such a tribute, to me, and I just felt it will be with me until the day that I go, tryin' to be with one of the greatest musicians alive, one of the most famous persons alive, and one of the nicest persons. He just like a lamb, he's so easy for people to talk to. He's such a nice gentleman. He'll talk to anybody, anywhere. He's not the kind of person that run, duck, and hide from his fans. That's what I like about him. I said, "Well, here's two *mah-sters.*" You know what a *mah-ster* is? Like two great men.

The two of you have probably made more blues recordings than any other pair of artists in history.

B.B.: I would think so. I think John has made many more than I.

John Lee: Oh, yeah, I have. I did a lot before he did.

B.B.: See, John was playin' when I was plowin'. I was still on. . . .

John Lee: What is a plow? [*Both laugh uproariously.*] You down there in Indianola.

B.B.: I was still in Indianola. Just come to Memphis, and John was makin' records then.

John Lee: You know who I met you through? [Promoter] B.B. Beaman.

B.B.: B.B. Beaman, Atlanta, Georgia.

John Lee: He was *thin* [*points to B.B.*]—weighed about 125, 130 pounds.

B.B.: Yeah.

Is that before you had a hit with "Three O'Clock Blues"?

B.B.: Yeah. That was about the time of [1952's] "Three O'Clock Blues." I'd made about six or seven records before "Three O'Clock Blues." The first four sides I made was for Bullet Record Company out of Nashville. It's funny—when I made those four sides, they went out of business. So I was that bad!

John Lee: You know the first thing I heard from you? "C'mon, Baby, Take A Swing With Me."

B.B.: That was one of the first four sides.

John Lee: [*Sings "C'mon, baby, take a swing with me."*]

B.B.: Yeah! Then after that I recorded several other tunes. I'd been listening to Lowell Fulson. I got his "Three O'Clock Blues," and when I did that, that was the one that did it.

John Lee: Yeah, I love that Lowell Fulson. Still do. "Everyday I Have The Blues"—he really did a good job on that.

B.B.: Yeah. You know, a lot of people don't know it, but after Memphis Slim wrote it and recorded it, Lowell Fulson was the first one that ever made a hit on it. 'Cause I don't think Memphis Slim called it "Everyday I Have The Blues." He called it something else, but it was the same lyrics.

John Lee: It was the same, same thing.

Do you hear traces of the Delta in John Lee Hooker's music?

B.B.: I don't think of John as a lot of people do. I think of John Lee Hooker as John Lee Hooker. And he play the blues like I heard 'em when I first started to play. And he *still* plays 'em. He plays the blues like John Lee Hooker does. It was two or three people that I knew before—in other words, that was older than John—and that was Lonnie Johnson, Robert Johnson, and Blind Lemon. I didn't know them all personally, but I did get a chance to meet Lonnie before he died. But these people, the way they played, they were so themselves. Well, in the modern times—and what I call modern times is the time I started to play—John Lee Hooker was one like that. Lightnin' Hopkins was like that.

John Lee: Oh, yeah.

B.B.: You *know* who they were the minute you hear 'em play. When John Lee Hooker plays, it's like writin' his name: "I'm John Lee Hooker." So I don't necessarily think of it as Delta or city or any other type . . .

John Lee: No, me neither. It's just blues.

B.B.: I just think of him as John Lee Hooker playin' the blues. It takes me home, of course. Yes!

John Lee: You know people ask me about Mississippi blues, jump blues, big city blues, Mississippi boogie—it's all the blues to me. The blues is all over the world now. People that don't speak English love the blues. I'm so happy for myself and other blues singers out there that the blues is beginning to get so popular.

Is it better now than during the 1950s and '60s?

John Lee: Oh, yeah! Are you kidding?

B.B.: Yeah, because nowadays people don't class you so much. It's not always thumbs-down, as it used to be. It used to be back in that time, in some places, the minute you say you a blues singer, it would be thumbs-down.

John Lee: Yep.

This article was first appeared in the September 1993 issue of Guitar Player.

B.B. and the Hook

B.B.: It was just like, "Oh, he's a nice guy, but he's a black."

John Lee: Yeah, yeah.

B.B.: "He's a nice guy, but he's white." Nowadays there's not so much of that. You do find it, but . . .

John Lee: . . . it's very rare.

B.B.: The only thing I kind of take issue with a little bit is when people say, "Oh, that's city blues, that's Delta blues, that's Mississippi, that's Chicago," and so on. Muddy Waters, for example, is to me the first of the so-called Chicago blues.

John Lee: That's right.

B.B.: Muddy left Mississippi, went to Chicago. John left and went to Detroit. I left and went to Memphis. We was still migrating, and wherever we went, our identity was pretty strong, like Muddy's was and the people surroundin' him. So you had a lot of the new guys to be born and started to play later. But to add to that, to me, blues is that label again. For instance, when John Lee made "Boogie Chillun," that wasn't blues. That was get up and get it!

John Lee: Get up and go! That was the first rock!

B.B.: That's right!

John Lee: You get rock and roll from that.

B.B.: So when people say blues and you say "Boogie Chillun," how in the heck could he be blue? He's havin' a ball! He's havin' a good time.

John Lee: That's right.

B.B.: If I sing "I got a sweet little angel," I'm not blue at all.

But when you were growing up, wasn't blues used as party music in the Delta?

B.B.: It still is. You didn't only just hear it in the roadhouses. You could hear it on the streets of Indianola, Sunflower. You could hear it in most of the places around. Even in Memphis, you could find it on Beale Street then. When I first went to Beale Street, there was . . . .

John Lee: Look, B., okay, I want to say something now. The blues was here when the world was born and man and woman got together. That's called the blues. Rock and roll sayin' the same thing that me and this man are saying: "My woman gone, she left me." See, rock and roll, you have the same thing, you just cut 'em in a different form. Cut 'em hopped up and shined and polished up. You sayin' the same thing. You talkin' about a woman that left him. You could make it a ballad. [*Croons "My woman have left me, she gone away."*] You wouldn't call that blues, but we all sayin' the same thing. But I'm gonna tell it in a different way. You understand that, B.?

B.B.: Yeah. Another thing, see, like they use words today that if I'd have used them around home comin' up, I'd get smacked in the mouth.

John Lee: Oh, you get you teeth knocked out!

B.B.: Like, for instance, if a guy say, "Man, make it funky!" If I said "funky" around home, my mother would knock the hell out of me! [*Both laugh.*]

John Lee: [*Like he's talking to his mom*] "I wasn't makin' funky!"

B.B.: Now you hear guys quite often, and nobody pay any attention: "Here, make it a funky beat, man. Put a funky beat." Well, now we accept it. But during the times I was growin' up, man, that was a bad word. That was like a kid swearin' in the house.

John Lee: It sho was. You say "funk" around my mother [*laughs*]. . . .

B.B.: Smack you! "Boy, what are you saying?" Bam!

What can someone gain by listening to B.B. King play guitar?

John Lee: Well, I'll tell you what he just told you about me. There only one B.B. There's a lot of imitations, lot of people pick up the guitar and follow this man—many, many of 'em. Used to be everybody that pick up a guitar try to sound like B.B. King. But you can tell when the *main* person, the main man, hit it. You know it's B.B. There was a boy in Chicago called Little B.B.

Andrew Odom?

John Lee: I think so. Tried to sound just like B.B., but I know it wasn't B.B. He be playin' with my cousin a lot, Earl Hooker.

B.B.: Yeah! That's a bad man. Ain't been but one other person play slide like Earl Hooker. You know who that is, for me?

John Lee: What, Bonnie Raitt?

B.B.: Bonnie Raitt. She is the best that is today, in my opinion.

John Lee: Yeah. So let me finish. So you can tell in a minute if you hear B.B. from an imitation—I can. What they don't know, maybe—and I think you know this, B.B., you know it [*points to Jas*], and I know it—anybody can sound like John Lee Hooker, but it ain't the real John Lee Hooker. He make it real good, but I can come along and just *hit it,* and they gone. They'd rather see me. Like B.B.: Lot of B.B.s out, but it ain't like the real one. You can tell it's B.B. King. He had one song I never will forget, but everything he do, I love it. Come to my house, I got stacks of B.B. I've got his six-pack. What they call it?

B.B.: The box set.

John Lee: I got that. And he got one in there: "You breakin' my heart, and there ain't anything I can do."

B.B.: "There ain't nothin' I can do," yeah.

John Lee: Boy, people used to play that thing!

It's interesting that both of you play Gibson's B.B. King guitar.

John Lee: Yeah, I went and bought one.

B.B.: John has played so many different guitars through the years, though. So many different ones, and they all sound like John.

John Lee: I got my identity. I got my style. I got nothin' to regret. I got nothin' to try to gain. I got nothin' to try to change. I wouldn't change for all the tea in China and all the money in the world. Who else you gonna sound like?

B.B.: It's just like one piano that sits over in the corner. If John go and play it, he gonna sound like himself, 'cause that's the way he play. If I go play it, I'm gonna sound like myself, 'cause that's the way I play. Now, if you don't believe it, you can hear Ray Charles play it or Pinetop [Perkins] or Elton John—they gonna sound like themselves. That's just one of the things that we're lucky we were blessed to be able to do—to be ourselves and do our own style. Like, when I heard John, I know it was John. If I hear Jimmy Reed, I know it's Jimmy Reed. My cousin Booker White—know it's him. Even in jazz and rock and roll, *certain* guys—not all—have that identity.

It's just like you as a journalist—certain styles people have of writing, singing, whatever they do. Like an architect or some of the Old Masters painters, da Vinci and all these guys that was doin' whatever they did. You *knew* the way that they did it. Same with the classical musicians—some of 'em you *knew.* Well, that's what I think of John. John couldn't change if he wanted to.

John Lee: No.

B.B.: I couldn't change if I wanted to.

John Lee: I'm like in the old way. I couldn't change if I wanted to. But *if,* like B.B. said, if I

> "There only one B.B. There's a lot of imitations, lot of people pick up the guitar and follow this man—but you can tell when the main person, the main man, hit it. You know it's B.B."
> —John Lee Hooker

did it, it wouldn't be me.

B.B.: It's just like a way of talkin'.

Is it a waste of time for someone to try to play like you?

John Lee: I would think so.

B.B.: Well, not really, John. Think about it. 'Cause when we first started—I know I did—when you first started, you heard somebody you liked.

John Lee: Oh, all the time. I did, I did.

B.B.: So I liked somebody when I first started. We had our idols then, just like kids do today. So there's nothing wrong, I don't think, with listening to or trying to play like someone—*in the beginning.* But then as you learn, you start to think that there's already one of those. So you try to play as you play.

John Lee: Don't play like Jimi Hendrix or B.B. King or somebody else. Play . . .

B.B.: . . . as you feel yourself. Put you in it. We all like somebody. Everybody did. John, who was your idol? Who did you like when you first started to play?

John Lee: Well, when I first started to playin', T-Bone Walker was my idol.

B.B.: Me too. [*Both laugh.*]

John Lee: Boy, I used to follow him like a little puppy followin' his mama.

B.B.: Yeah, me too. I tell ya somebody else I liked—I was crazy about Lowell Fulson.

John Lee: Whooo weee! "Everyday I Have The Blues," and then "Blue Shadows Fallin'."

B.B.: Even before that, Lonnie Johnson.

John Lee: Oh, man!

B.B.: I was crazy 'bout him. Lonnie Johnson and Blind Lemon. Those were my people, along with T-Bone Walker.

John Lee: Lonnie Johnson, he sing, but it didn't sound like deep blues. What would you call that?

B.B.: I don't know. He was so versatile, he did some of all of it. Lonnie Johnson. Now, most of the kids today are crazy about Robert Johnson. Now, I think Robert was great. I think he was really great, but he wasn't my idol.

John Lee: No, he wasn't mine, either.

Why did Robert Johnson have a gold record in 1990?

B.B.: Well, that's from the same thing I just got through sayin'. Johnny Winter *swears* on him. [*Laughs.*] He says he's the greatest thing ever happened—that's what he told me. And a lot of the kids are crazy about it because they say it's authentic.

John Lee: It's authentic. Let's put it like this: The man has been out of existence so long that they really built him up a lot just talkin' and writin' about it. Then when they did put it out, everybody went for it. He get so much publicity.

B.B.: There you go. You just hit it.

Publicity?

B.B.: Of course!

John Lee: So much publicity!

Do you like Robert Johnson's music?

John Lee: Some of it, yeah. I'm like B.B. I'm not a fan of his, though. But I listen to it.

B.B.: And I like some of the things he did. I just didn't idolize him like I did Lonnie Johnson.

John Lee: Lonnie Johnson and T-Bone Walker. I would have dust his feet if he'd have said so.

B.B.: Here's what happens in a lot of cases. We'll take John as an example. John has been great since I first heard him. He was doin' great things all the time, but he couldn't get the publicity.

John Lee: That's right.

B.B.: Until he got this manager he have today and Bonnie Raitt.

John Lee: This man right there [*points outside the room to Mike Kappus of San Francisco's Rosebud Agency*].

B.B.: So that was the same thing with me. My manager's name is Sid Seidenberg. So when Sid and I got together, that's when things started to change. Gosh, as great as Bonnie Raitt is—I've known her all her career—and as great as Robert Cray and Roy Rogers and a lot of the people we hear today are, John has been like that since before they were *born.*

John Lee: It's true.

B.B.: You understand? But, thanks to John's manager and other people that know how to package it, the people that knew Robert, that knew Roy, that knew Bonnie—many of the people—now can hear John. Like a guy told me not long ago: He said his son came home and says, "Daddy, you got to hear this guy I just heard!" And his father say, "Who is it, son?" He said, "Oh, you wouldn't know him. You wouldn't know anything about him." Said, "Well, who is it, son?" He says, "You got to hear B.B. King! You just got to hear it!" [*Laughs.*] So his father said, "Son, long before you was thought of, I was listening to him." He said, "Yeah, but dad, you don't know about things like that! This is new!" So it's the same thing. John and myself and a lot of us that's been playing for a long time just never got the break.

John Lee: Never got the breaks, and then they just didn't push the blues like they should. They still don't, like they really should right now. But they pushin' more than they used to.

PHOTO: JAY BLAKESBERG

the Meeting

> **B.B.: "One of the things I take issue with quite a bit, you hear people say, 'Oh, the resurging of the blues.'" John Lee: "Resurgin'! It ain't never went nowhere!"**

They used to just push it under the cover.

Does recording with rock stars make that big a difference?

B.B.: Oh, yeah. Of course, of course! That's why I mentioned Bonnie Raitt. It's like U2 and myself. Had it not been for U2, a lot of people wouldn't know. But thanks to Sid, we were able to have this happen.

John Lee: The same thing I say about my manager. Thanks to Mike. You know, I had give up recordin'. I said, "I'm not gonna record no more." The record companies, they rob you blind. Like Modern Records and Vee Jay and them—they just robbed you. You know they was takin' everything you had. Well, I think you know that too. [*B.B. nods and laughs.*] They were! I said, "I'm gonna get out of the business." And I had been out for about eight years. I was still with Mike. Mike says, "Let's get you a record deal." He worked *hard*, got me a record deal. Got me pulled together. And that's how I come to be . . . I never was forgotten, but I got disgusted. I said I wasn't gonna record anymore.

B.B.: See, Mike's a very good man, as Sid is to me. They always lookin' out for things that'll help us, that will get the publicity that we . . .

John Lee: . . . never was able to get.

B.B.: Now, don't misunderstand me. Nobody gave Bonnie nothin'. Nobody gave Robert [Cray] anything. They earned it. But today they are superstars. What I'm trying to say is that had people known John in the beginning as they have known him now, he would have been a superstar years ago.

John Lee: Right. Just wasn't gettin' that push.

Like Muddy Waters, you're both making very good records during the second halves of your careers.

John Lee: Well, Muddy gone, but he . . . .

B.B.: But he was makin' them then, man!

John Lee: Yeah, he was makin' them, but they wasn't bein' pushed.

B.B.: Even today—take it from me—if I wasn't on the record with U2, nobody would have played B.B. King.

I don't know about that.

B.B.: Can you take my word for it?

Yes, but I'd listen to your record even if it were just you and an acoustic guitar.

John Lee: *You* know he's a monster. You know how good he is. But you're just one.

B.B.: Look, I'm not trying to be false modesty or anything of that sort. But today listen to the radio. Watch the T.V. And every time that you hear a new B.B. King record play . . . . Of course, I don't think it will be like that with this album John and I just got through doin'. I think this is gonna be played.

John Lee: I think so too. I'm prayin'.

B.B.: But prior to that and prior to John and Bonnie Raitt—understand?—I *bet* you wouldn't hear a John Lee Hooker record played.

John Lee: I don't think so either, B.

B.B.: I have to eat my words. I said that if I ever had a record played on MTV, I would eat the cover. [*Bot h laugh.*] So I had to eat my words because they did play me with U2. We did "When Love Comes To Town," and they played it. I said, "Well, I'll be darned. I might as well go start eatin' covers." [*Laughs.*]

John Lee: Gettin' back to Bonnie Raitt. She was on about 20 years that nobody ever knowed her. Remember that?

B.B.: Yeah. Used to be an opening act for me.

John Lee: Me and her used to party together. She used to drink liquor like water.

B.B.: One of the nicest people I ever met, though. One of the nicest.

John Lee: Oh, she's nice. Whoooo wee.

B.B.: She's a great person. Nobody gave her anything. She earned it. I was so happy to see it.

John Lee: Nobody give her nothin'. She earned it. Like this man here, nobody give him nothin'. He earned it. Nobody give me nothin'. I earned it. But they just beginnin' to play us now, but not like they should.

B.B.: I think what we're talkin' about now is, today the blues is known better. One of the things I take issue with quite a bit, you hear people say, "Oh, the resurging of the blues."

John Lee: Resurgin'! It ain't never went nowhere!

B.B.: It never left, as far as I can tell. I've worked on an average of 300 days a year since '56, many concerts every year. What they fail to realize, though, is that when you have superstars like Eric Clapton or Robert Cray or Jeff Healey or Stevie Ray Vaughan, when they came on the scene, they had their new thing goin' *and* they played the blues, so that made a difference. But they hadn't left nowhere. It's just each time we got a new disciple.

Does it seem like there's something fundamentally wrong with this?

John Lee: No, it don't bother me. Not at all. I don't know what about B.

B.B.: No, the only thing that bothered me is that we didn't have nobody like that at first.

John Lee: That's right.

B.B.: That was the thing that bothered me. We wasn't recognized. So today, to find that we have some people that's playin' the blues and not ashamed to say it .

John Lee: Right. Then they had the right people to push it.

B.B.: That today makes me happy. Very happy.

John Lee: Me too.

B.B.: So today we got superstars. John's a superstar today.

John Lee: B.B. I know could have been. . . . That older stuff we did? It should have been . . . .

B.B.: There was a lot of good stuff done.

B.B. and the Hook

When you did "Boogie Chillun," man, everybody should have known about it.

John Lee: Yeah. And "Boom, Boom," "Dimples," and stuff like that.

Do you remember creating "Boogie Chillun"?

John Lee: Yeah, I do. I used to hear my stepfather, when I was a kid. My style—I got it from him. He'd do stuff like that [*sings "boom-da-boom, boom-da-boom, boom-da-boom" while snapping fingers*], "Boogie Chillun," different things. I do remember that. I got people to do something like what rested in him. Everything I do is *direct* from Will Moore, my stepfather. He play just like I'm playin' today. I learnt from him. He played that kind of stuff—foot stompin'.

Open G?

John Lee: Yeah. "Mama don't allow me to . . ."

B.B.: ". . . stay out all night long."

John Lee: "Boogie Chillun" and all that kind of stuff. It used to be "Boogie Woogie," and I changed it to "Boogie Chillun." I didn't know it was gonna. . . . You know, it was just a old funky lick I found.

B.B.: But it was a monster hit.

Were you writing about your own mom?

John Lee: Nah, it's just a song. There's so many kids, their mama don't allow them to stay out all night long, you know. I couldn't just be talkin' about my mama. Lot of people have kids don't stay out all night long, but they gonna stay out anyway. [*Sings "Mama didn't allow me to stay out all night long."*] I didn't care what she didn't allow, they would stay out anyways! They knew they would get a beatin' when they get home, but they still stay out.

Does playing guitar bring you as much joy and satisfaction as it did when you were younger?

B.B.: Yes. I think it brings even more today.

John Lee: It do.

B.B.: Because I'm more concerned about what I'm trying to do. Then, I was just havin' fun.

John Lee: Havin' fun, drinkin', stayin' out.

B.B.: [*Laughs.*] As you said, stayin' out all night long. But now today I'm concerned about it, because if I get out there now and I hit something that don't sound right, I know that there are a lot of people that are listening to me.

John Lee: Critics.

B.B.: Well, not only that, but a lot of the kids that are listening to me. Reminds me of a story I heard once. There was a trumpet teacher teachin' trumpet to his class. And one little boy, the teacher was tryin' to teach him to play non-pressure, where his jaws wouldn't balloon out. So the teacher was talkin'. So there's one little smart egg in the class [*laughs*], and the teacher say, "Why are you playin' like that? I keep tryin' to tell you that when your jaws pop out like that, that's not good." So the little smart egg, he said, "Well, Dizzy Gillespie plays like that!" So the teacher thought about it for a moment, and he says, "Yeah, but there's only *one* Dizzy Gillespie." So I think about it a lot of times now when I'm playin', that the kids out there idolize me, like me. And not just kids, but people that are starting to play or the people that's already playin' and maybe came out to admire what I do or be critical of what I do. And if I make them wrong notes or put them in the wrong way

BLUES
B B King
Lucille

"Playing guitar brings me even more joy and satisfaction today."

PHOTO: JAY BLAKESBERG

or hit something I don't intend to hit. . . .

John Lee: B., I have never heard nobody as true as you, man. Nobody.

B.B.: Well, thank you. But I make mistakes, though. So when I make 'em now. . . .

John Lee: Everybody do.

B.B.: Yeah. To answer your question, when I make a mistake now, it hurts [*thumps chest*]. Oh, yes. It hurts.

John Lee: You're right.

B.B.: Because, see, I'm supposed to be professional—that's what I think to myself. I'm supposed to entertain. I'm supposed to rehearse, practice enough to not do that.

John Lee: But some people, when you look out into the audience, they don't even notice what you did, they so excited about lookin' at him. But he know it [*points to B.B.*].

B.B.: Yeah, and that hurts, don't it?

John Lee: Yeah, that's right. They may not know, but you know you made that mistake. And you lookin' back at the fellows, and some of them look like they kind of smile, you know, because they know I did.

B.B.: But when you're able to run it into something else. . . .

John Lee: To cover up.

B.B.: Yeah, like you and I, say we talkin', and we got a male conversation goin' on and all of a sudden a lady walked in, you gotta change it into something else! [*Laughs.*] That's the way it is with playin'. Here's another thing: When guys start to gettin' to be our age, John, they're not quite as fast as they used to be.

John Lee: I know.

B.B.: And as you get a little older, you think more about it. Remember when you was young and somebody said, "Come here," you get up and start running? Now you think about it—do I really want to run, or will I just walk on over there?

John Lee: Yeah, walk to the car!

B.B.: And a lot of the youngsters that come around can play rings around me—this is not false modesty!—but what they do, they think of what I did that gave them a chance to think beyond that. You think Graham Bell thought of what his work would be doin' today? There was that first foundation. I was able to go and see one of my idols, Lonnie Johnson, and I was able to shake his hand and thank him. Because he was one of the people that made me want to play. I don't know. Here I am, still doin' somethin' with it.

John Lee: Well, B., time for me to go.

Is this the first interview you've done together?

B.B.: Yes. The very first.

John Lee: I've did it with a lot of people, but this is the first I ever did with B.B. And I couldn't wait for tonight to come!

B.B.: It's an honor to me. What you are doing for us will even help it to go further. We appreciate it. Thank you. And thanks to a couple of other guys named Mike and Sid.

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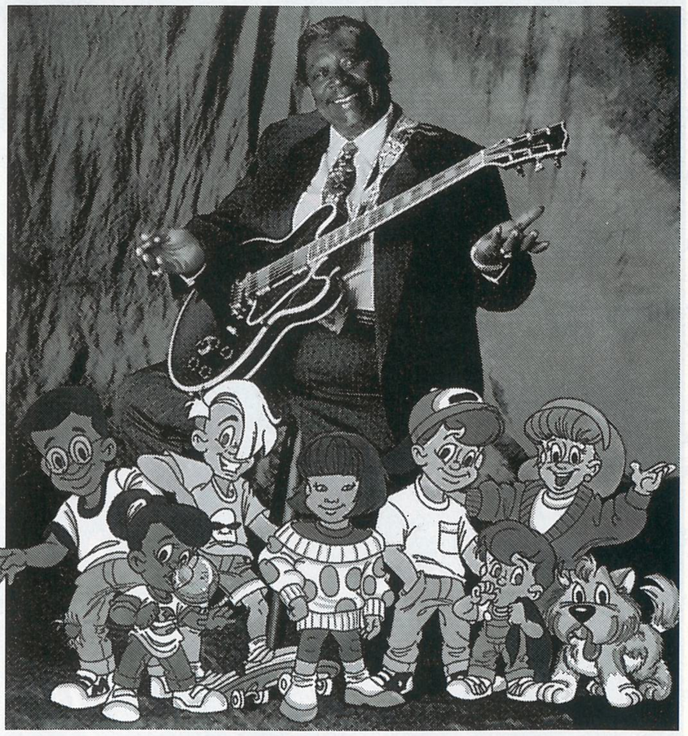

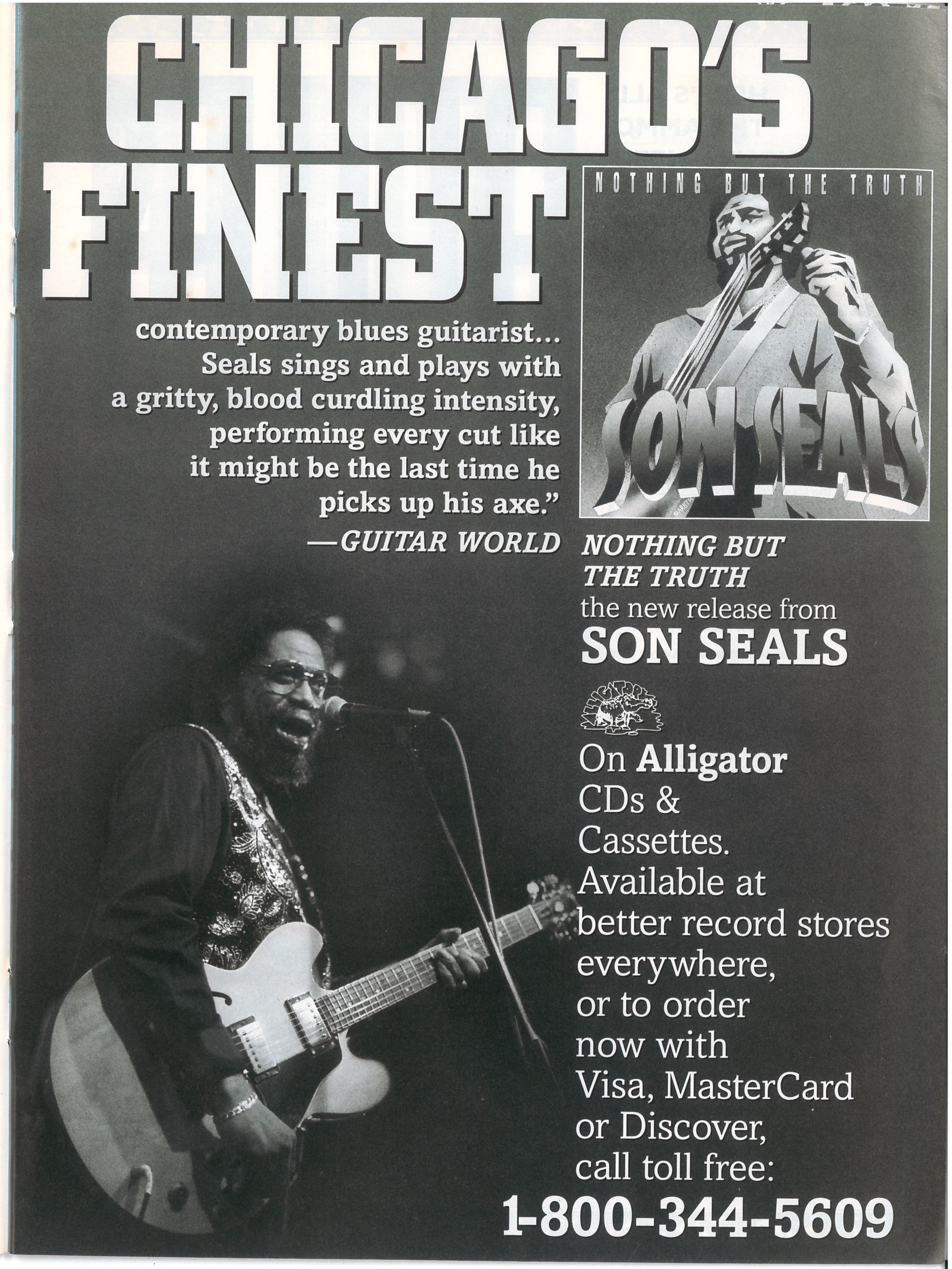

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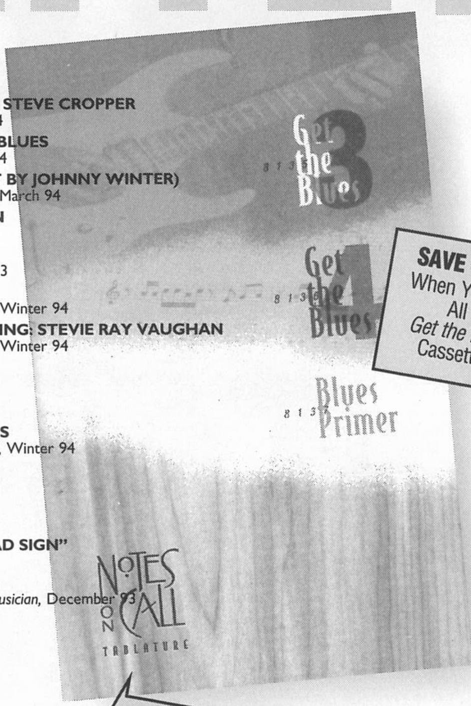

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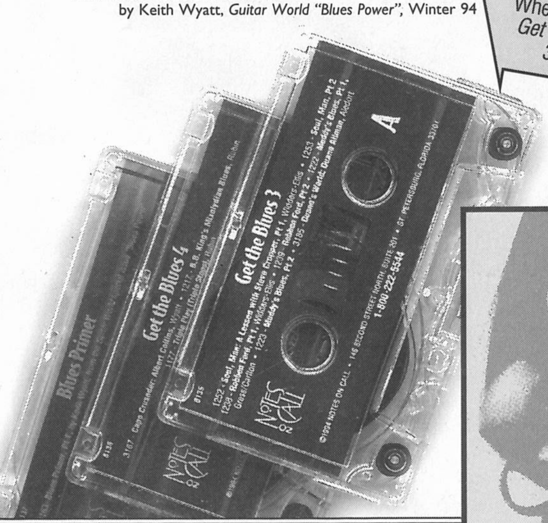

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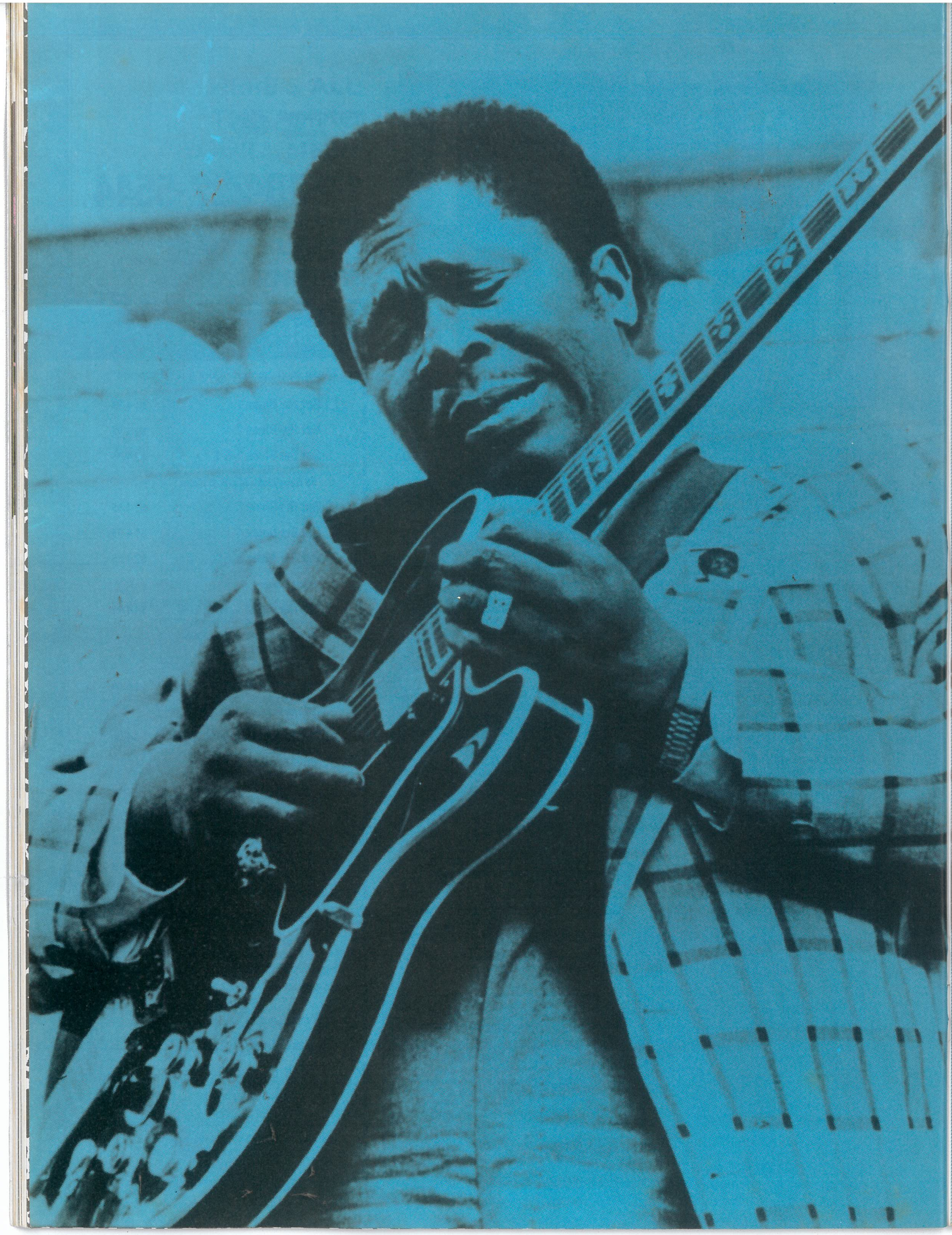


If you've never played the blues, prepare for an epiphany. The following emotionally-charged choruses (blues-speak for 12-bar cycles) from four of B.B. King's greatest recorded performances contain everything you've always wanted to know about blues guitar but were afraid to ask. Those who have been living the blues won't be left out in the cold, either. There's *puh-lenty* here to benefit even the most seasoned veteran. Keep in mind that

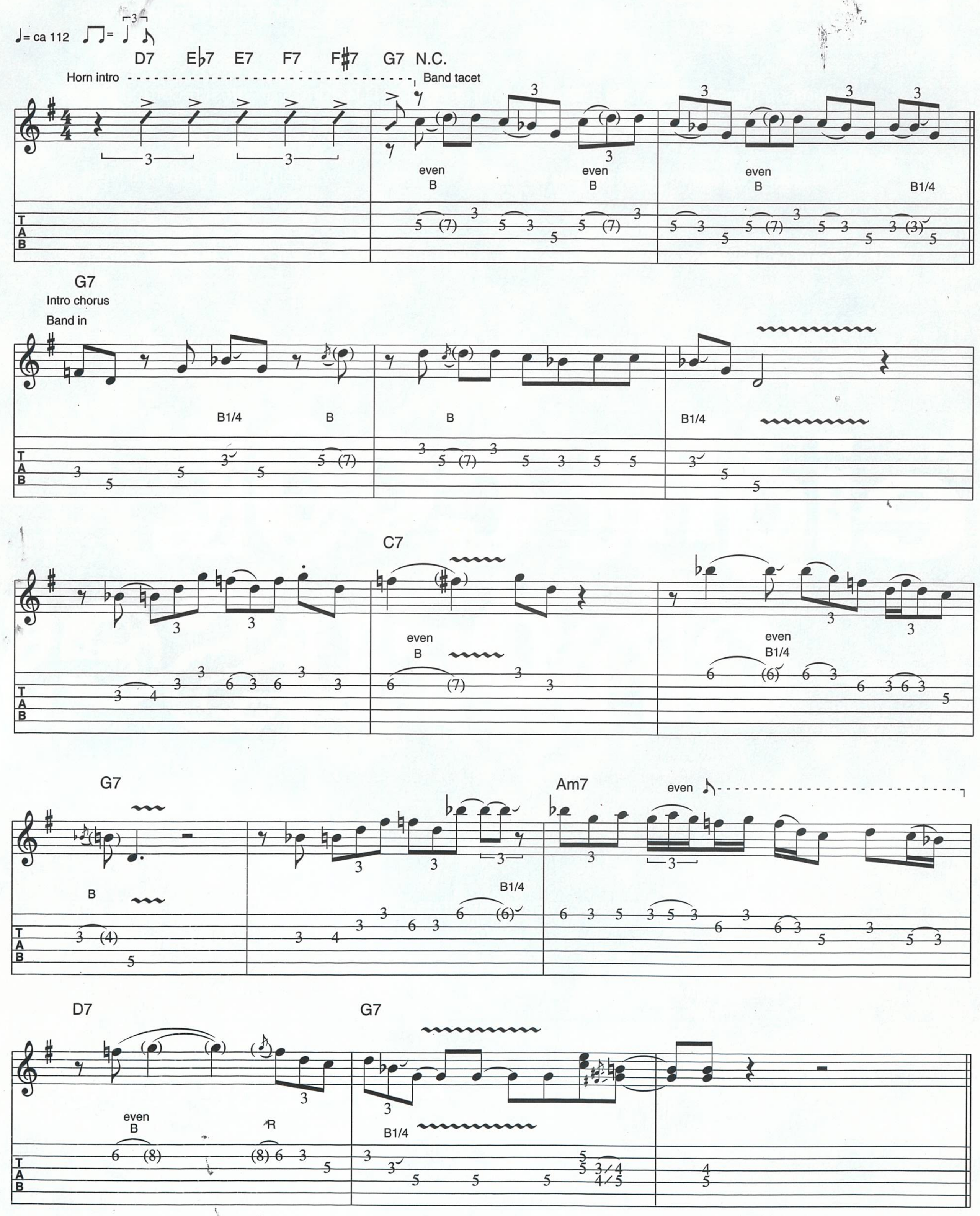
eight cool choruses

though B.B. has gigged up to 300 nights per year for nearly half a century (!), he never plays *anything* the same way twice. Learn these solos well, but more importantly, use them as conceptual building blocks for your own blues excursions. The notes are all here, but the emoting part is up to you.

by Jesse Gress

"You Upset Me, Baby" — Studio Version

This intro chorus, taken from the *Best of B.B. King — Vol. 1* CD, was first released in 1959. As usual, B.B. mixes a few even eighth-notes into the swing eighth feel. The standard blues progression is harmonically enhanced by a jazzy ii-V change (*Am7* to *D7*) in bars 9 and 10.



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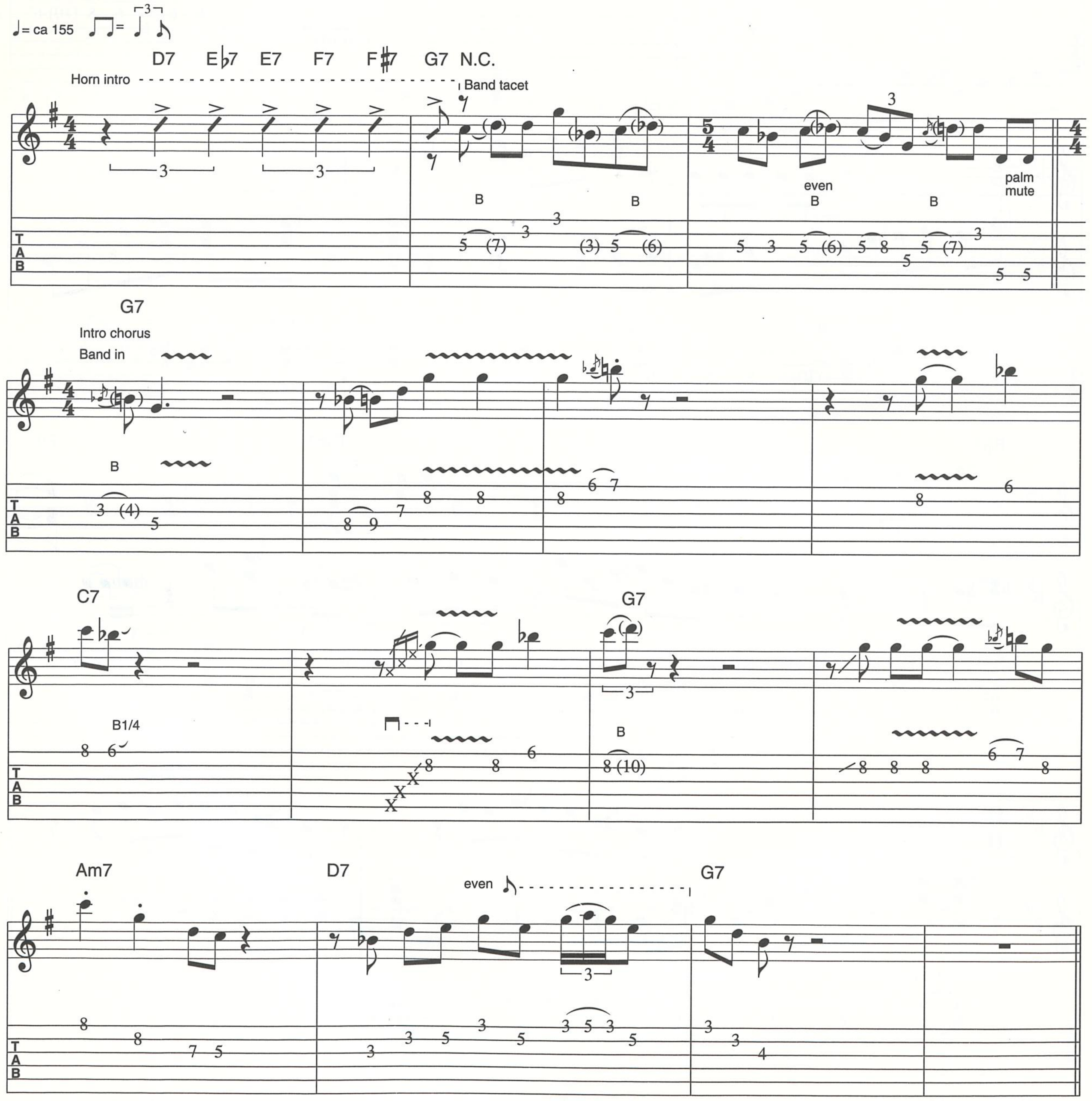
"You Upset Me, Baby" — Live Version

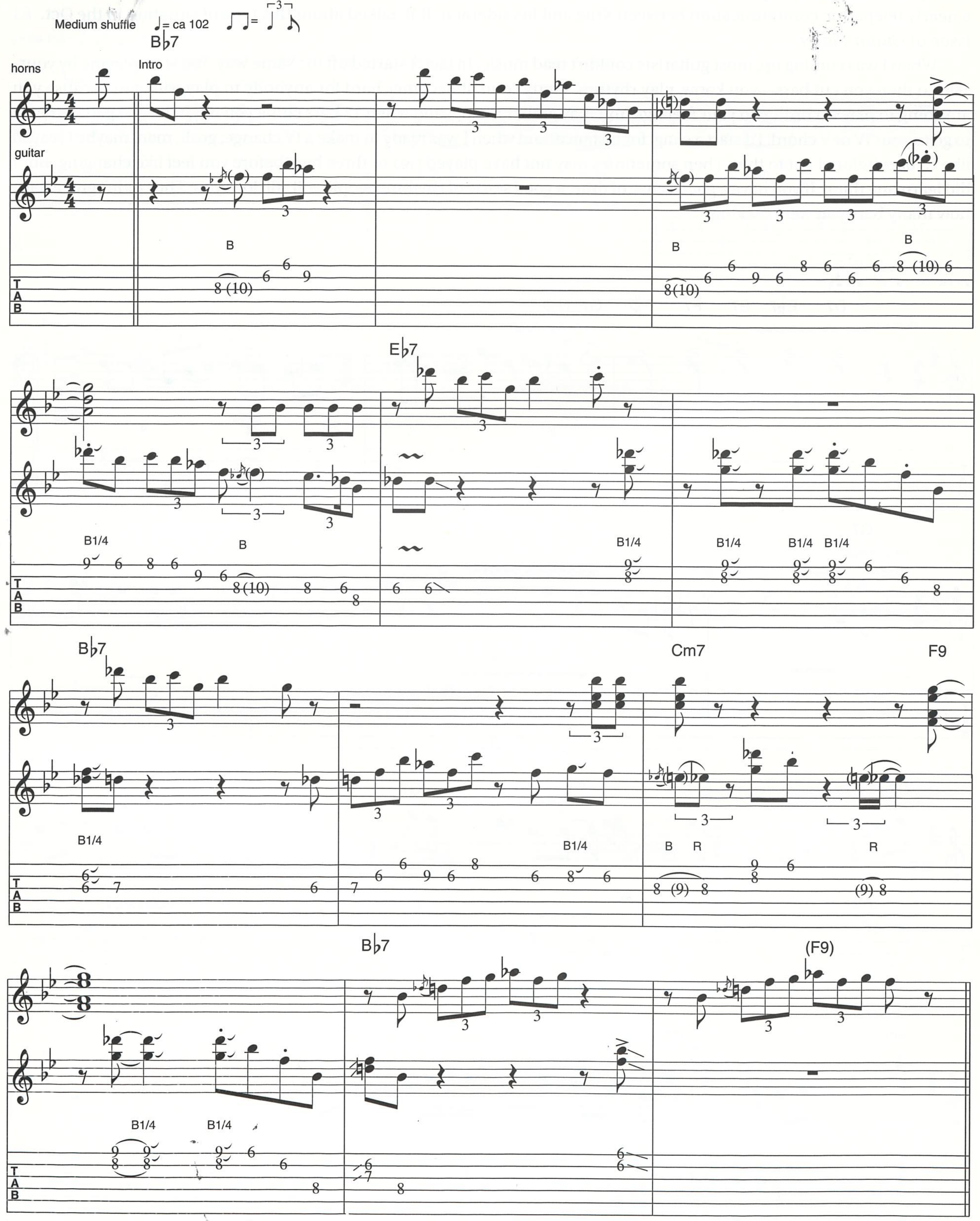
Much faster than its studio counterpart, this live version of "You Upset Me, Baby" from *Live at the Regal* features the same horn section intro with an extra surprise: B.B. and the band add an extra beat at the end of the two-bar a cappella guitar break! Though this was probably unintentional, everyone miraculously coincides on the "one." This happy accident illustrates a nearly telepathic communication between King and his sidemen. B.B. talked about this type of situation in the Oct. '83 issue of *Guitar Player.*

"When I was coming up, most guitarists couldn't read music. In fact, I started off the same way. You start playing by yourself, so then you cut bars—you know, play rhythm. Pretty soon, it becomes hard for anybody to play with you because you are going to play according to your feelings. You may grab the song, and when 12 bars come you might be just getting ready to go to your IV or V chord. I'd start a song, for instance, and when I was ready to make a IV change, gosh, man, maybe I played like 15 bars before I got to that. Then sometimes may not have played two or three bars before you feel like changing. But I did learn one thing: If you have a good sense of time, a good sense of rhythm, people will still love you. They didn't give a darn how many bars you were making."



"Every Day I Have The Blues" — Studio Version, Intro Chorus

B.B.'s theme song, also culled from *The Best of B.B. King Vol. 1*, kicks off with jumping horns. He responds to the call of the horn section with classic triplet-based phrases throughout. Record either part, then play along to study how the horn and guitar lines compliment each other. Bars 9 and 10 feature the same ii-V change found in "You Upset Me, Baby."


Medium shuffle
♩= ca 102
B♭7
horns
Intro
guitar
E♭7
B♭7
Cm7
F9
B♭7
(F9)
B
B1/4
T
A
B

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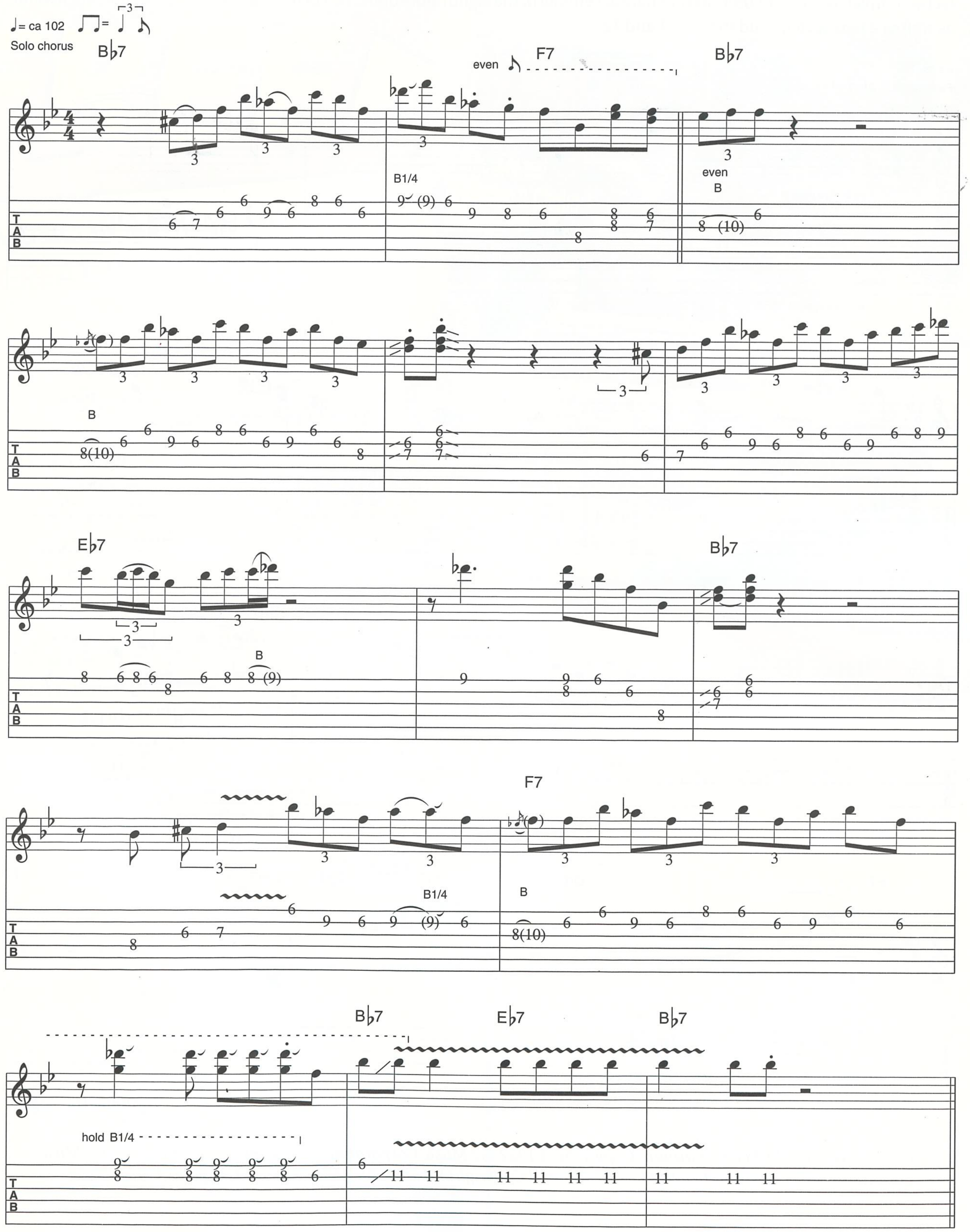
"Every Day I Have The Blues" — Studio Version, Solo Chorus

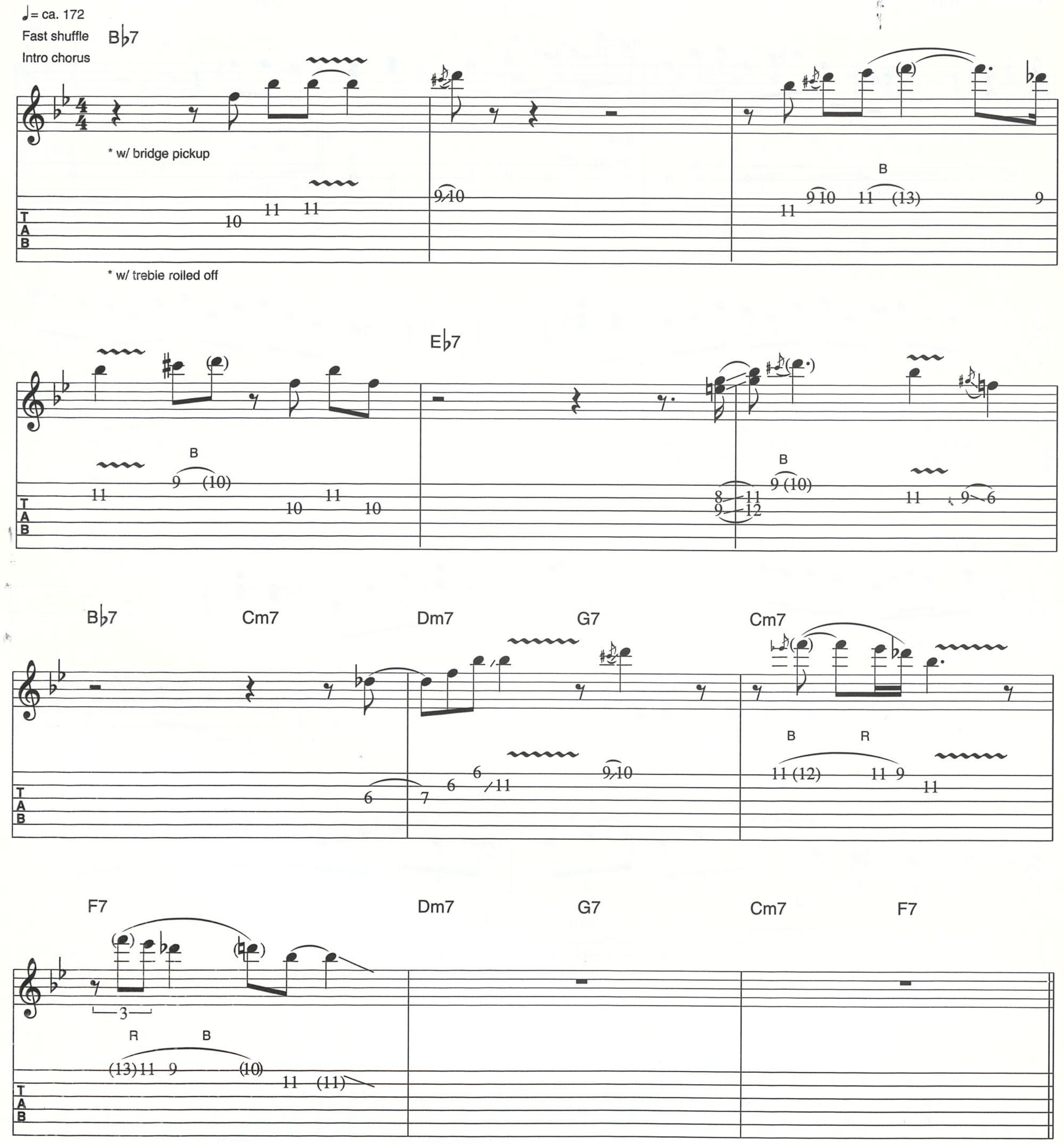
A little bit of T-Bone and a whole lotta B.B. comprise this solo chorus, starting with a great two-bar turnaround. Note that the progression reverts back to the standard 12-bar blues changes for the solo.


♩= ca 102
Solo chorus
B♭7
even
F7
B♭7
E♭7
B♭7
F7
B♭7
E♭7
B♭7
B1/4
B
hold B1/4
T
A
B

eight cool choruses

"Every Day I Have The Blues" — Live Version, Intro Chorus

The same horn chart functions as an introductory vamp while B.B. hits the stage on this uptempo live version, also from *Live at the Regal.* He explodes into this intro chorus using Lucille's bridge pickup with the treble control rolled off. The drum feel is completely different there as the snare accents all of the eighth-note upbeats. There are a few changes in the progression as well as a new turnaround in bars 11 and 12.


♩= ca. 172
Fast shuffle
Intro chorus
B♭7
* w/ bridge pickup
* w/ treble rolled off
E♭7
B♭7
Cm7
Dm7
G7
Cm7
F7
Dm7
G7
Cm7
F7
T
A
B

continued on page 51

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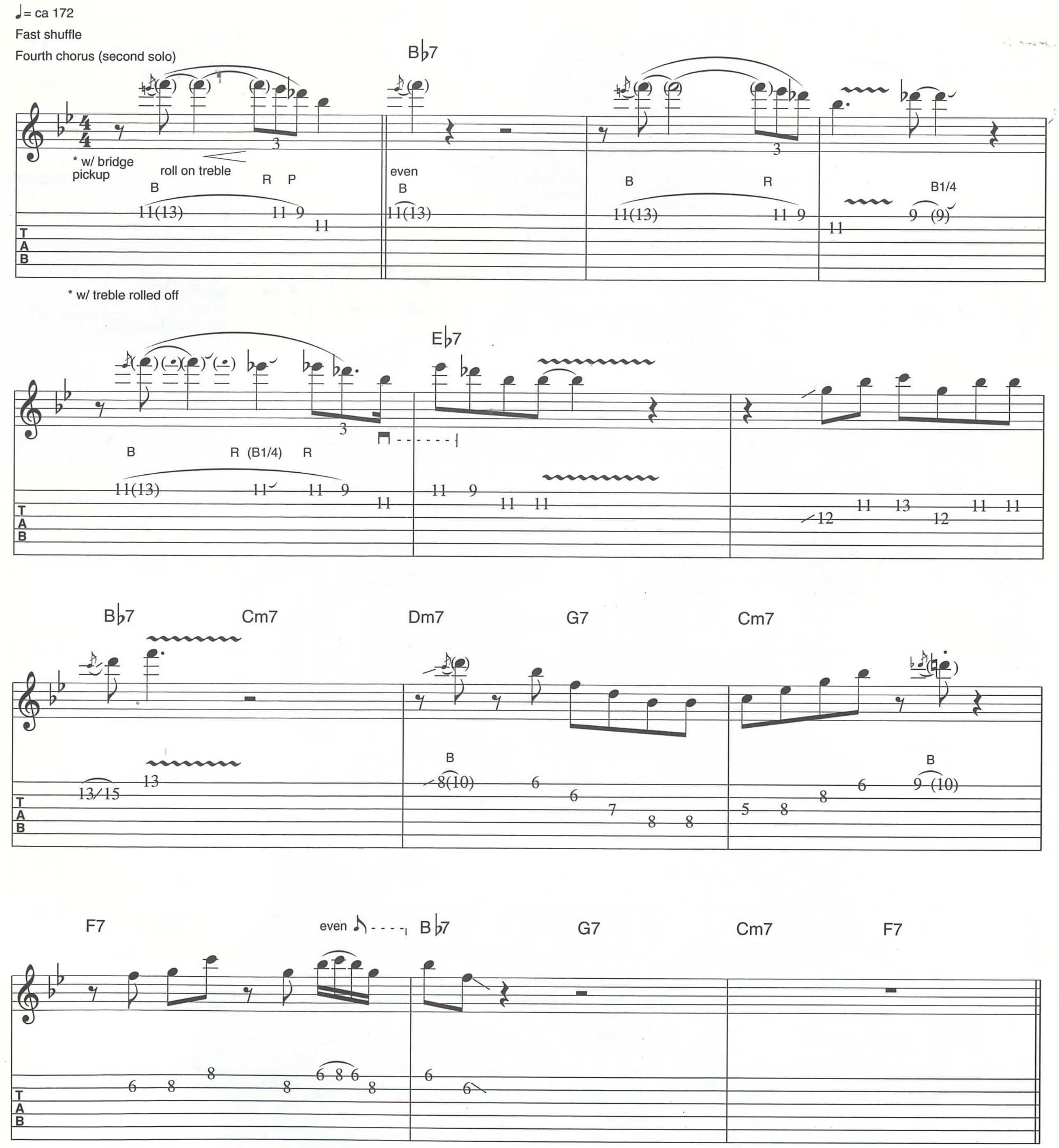
"Every Day I Have The Blues" — Live Version, Second Solo Chorus

After playing through his first solo with his tone control rolled back, B.B. tears into his second solo chorus with an aggressive bend, then cranks the treble back on before releasing and pulling off. This all happens in a flash, but it propels the excitement level of the solo to new heights. You can hear B.B.'s Charlie Christian influence in those *B♭* and *Cm7* arpeggios in bars 8 and 9.


♩= ca 172
Fast shuffle
Fourth chorus (second solo)
B♭7
* w/ bridge pickup
roll on treble
B R P
even
B
R
B1/4
T A B
11(13) 11 9 11
11(13)
11(13) 11 9 11
9 (9)
* w/ treble rolled off
E♭7
B R (B1/4) R
11(13) 11 11 9 11
11 9 11 11
12 11 13 12 11 11
B♭7 Cm7 Dm7 G7 Cm7
13/15 13
B
8(10) 6 6 7 8 8
B
5 8 8 6 9 (10)
F7 even B♭7 G7 Cm7 F7
6 8 8 8 6 8 6 8
6 6

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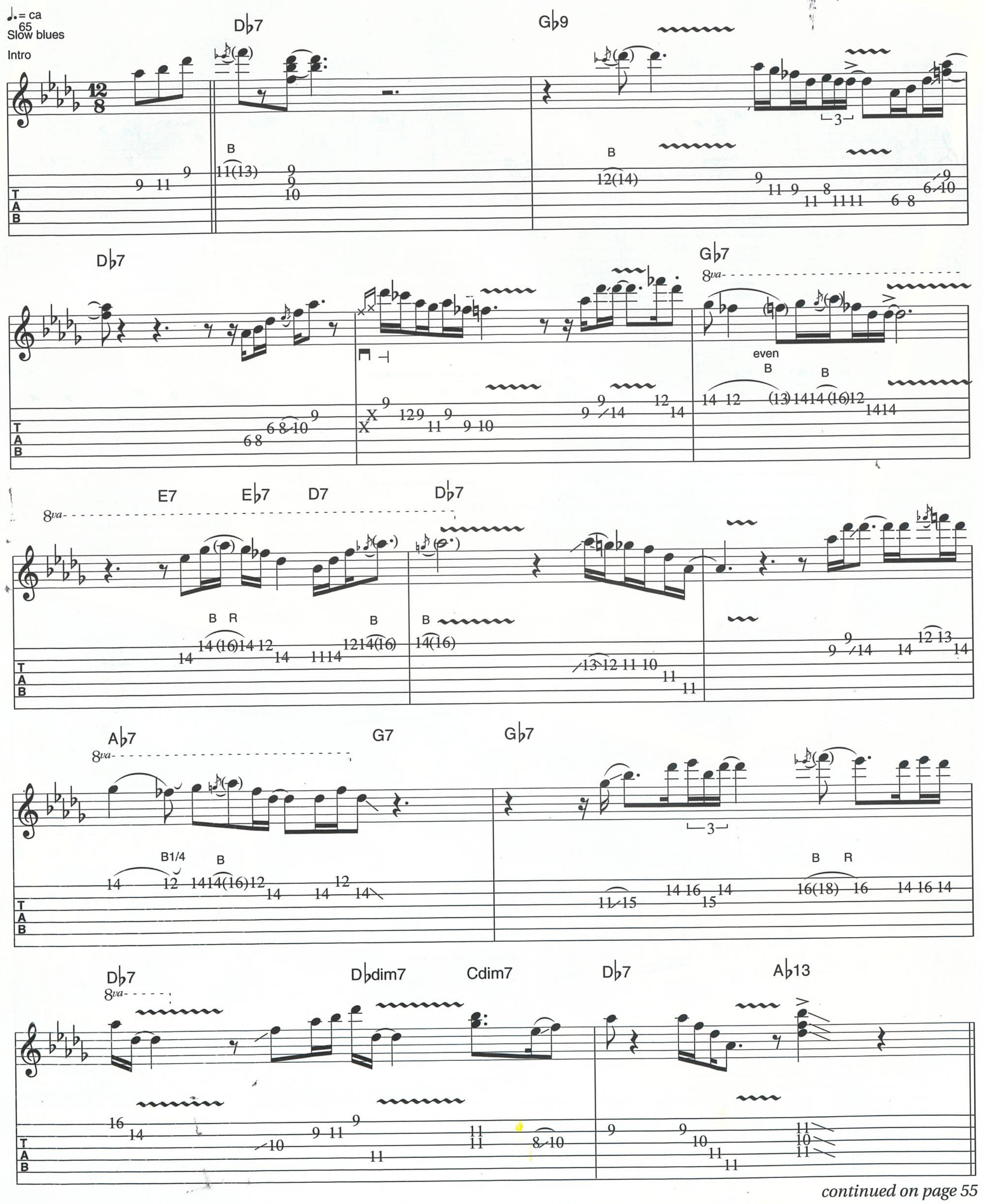
eight cool choruses

"Sweet Little Angel"

Opening with perhaps his most famous phrase, B.B.'s intro chorus to this solo blues from *Live at the Regal* is sweet indeed. To get a handle on these tricky rhythmic groupings, try mentally converting each beat to a measure of 3/8. Doubling the value of each note yields a bar of 3/4 on each beat and makes those figures easier to comprehend.



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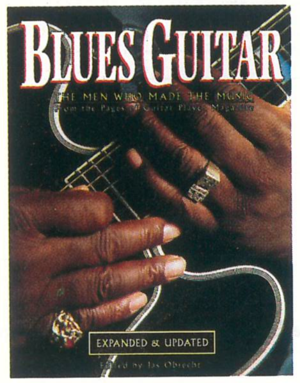

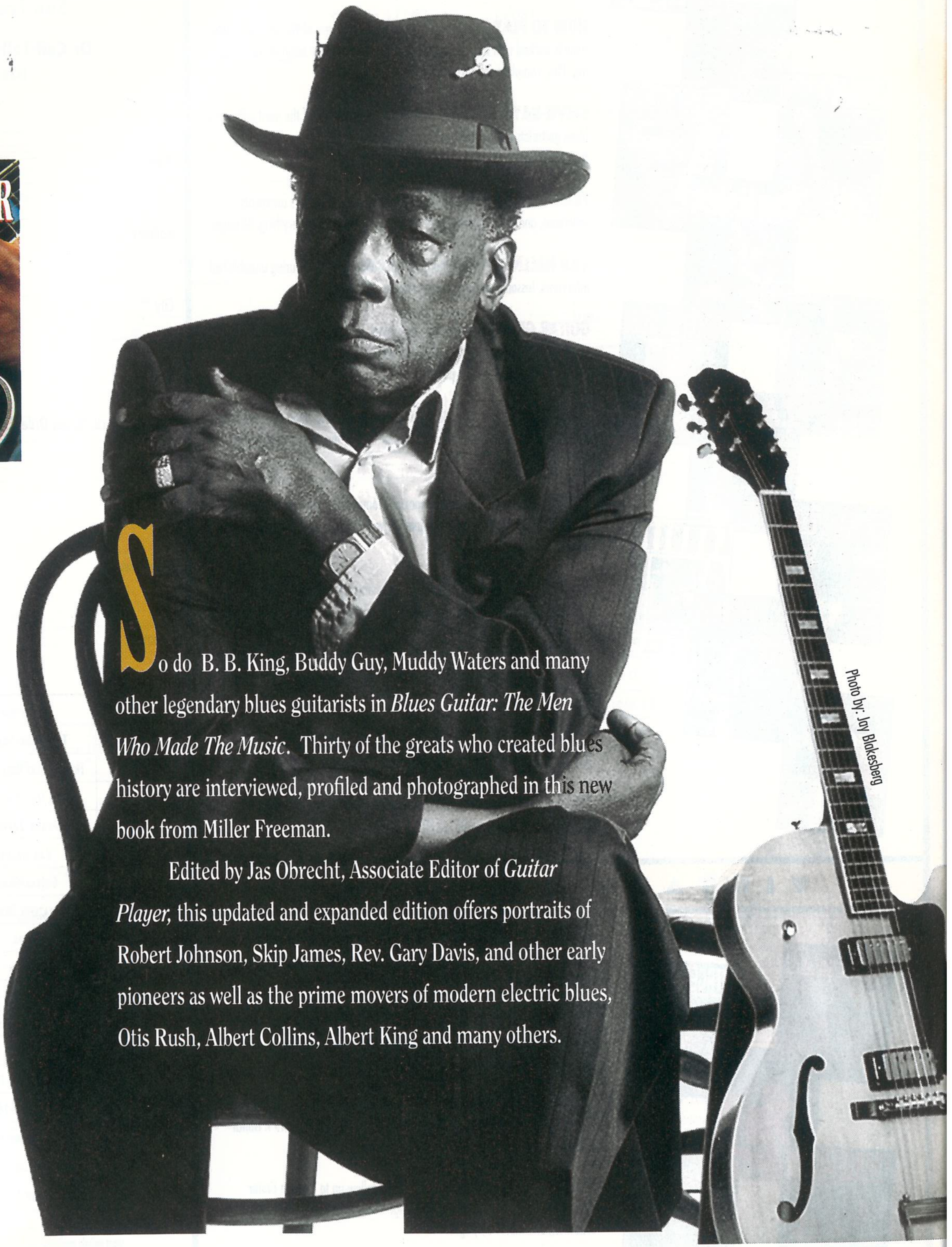

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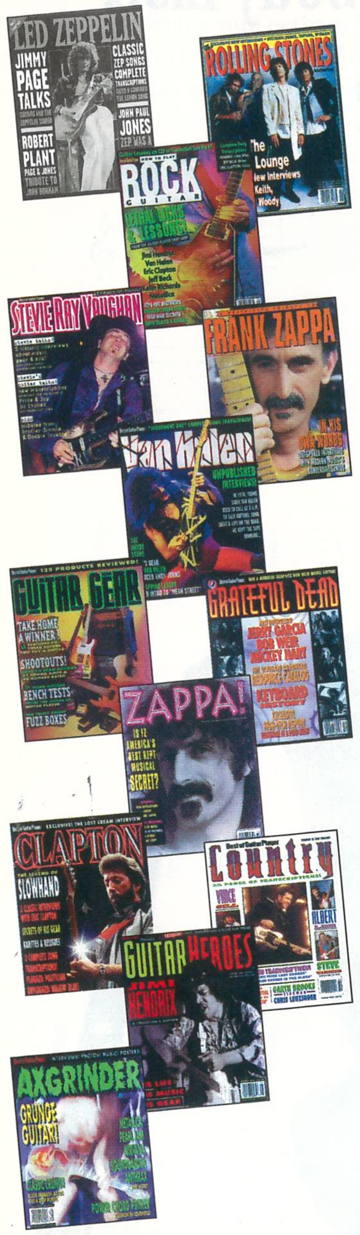

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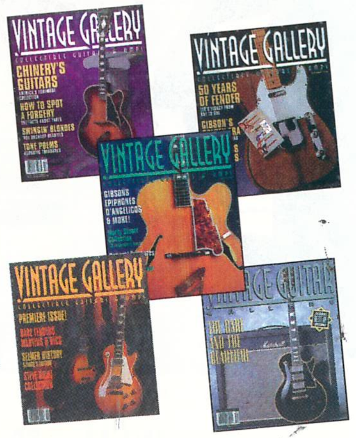

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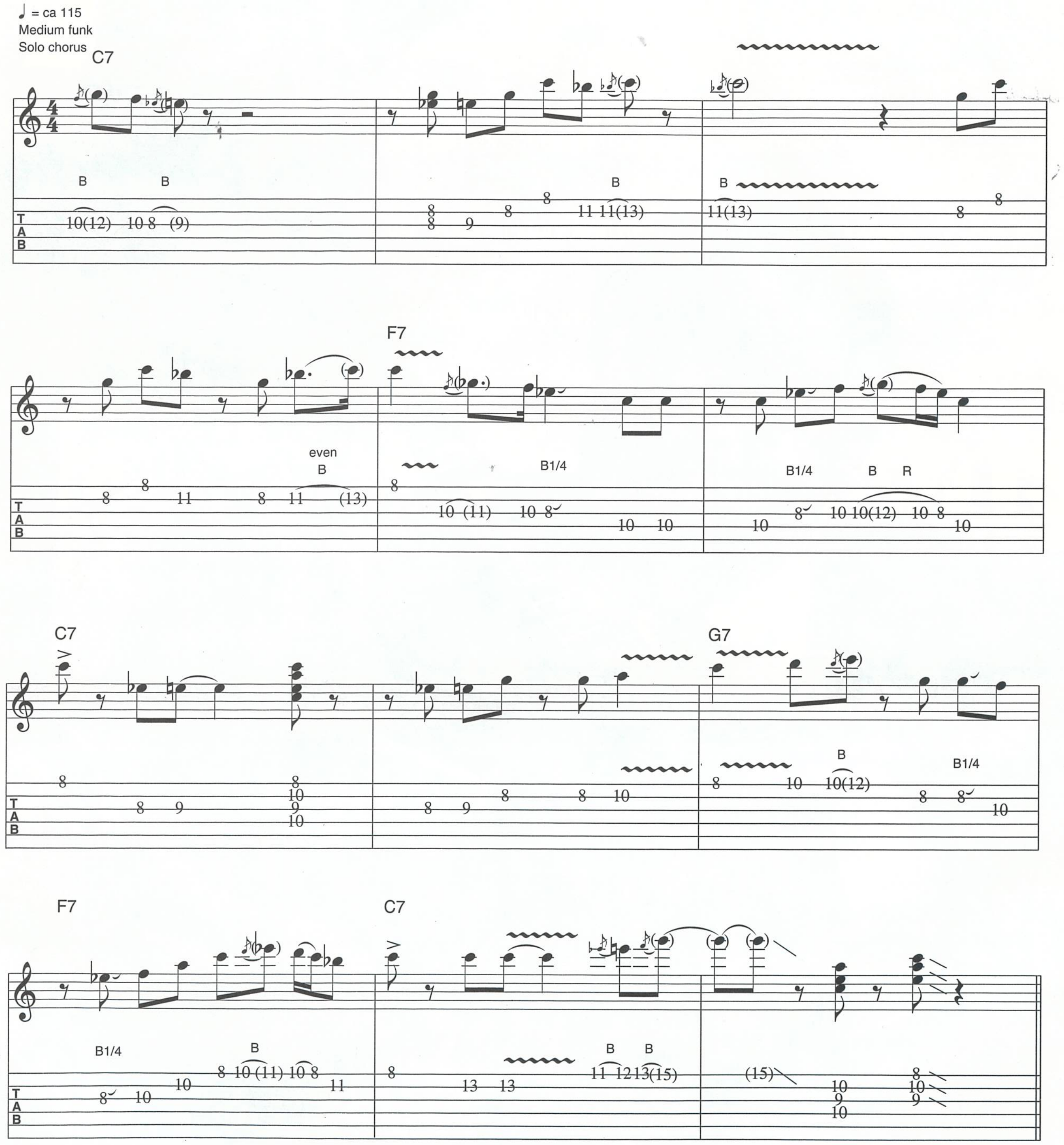
"Why I Sing The Blues"

This 1969 version of another B.B. King classic comes for the *Live And Well* album. It's the only straight-eighth groove in the lot, and B.B. keeps it simple, funky, and swinging.



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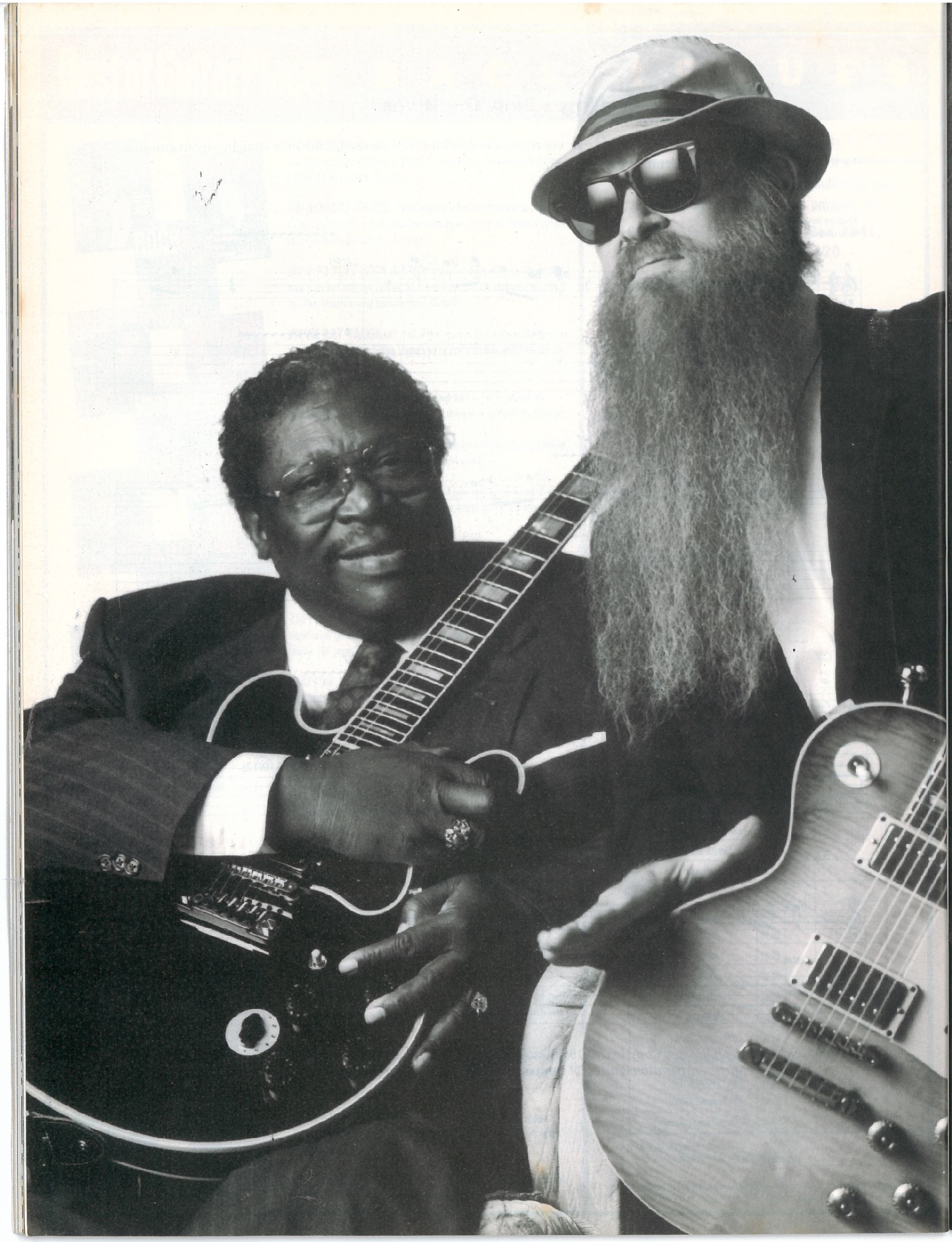


PHOTO: BILL REITZEL

A decade after Tom Wheeler's B.B. cover story, Billy Gibbons flew up from a break in his ZZ Top tour schedule to join Jas Obrecht and Mr. King for *Guitar Player*'s July '91 cover story interview. The meeting ground was the Embassy Suites in Indianapolis, Indiana. On hand was a cassette of early B.B. King guitar highlights from Ace Records' *The Memphis Masters* and a copy of Stefan Grossman's *Bottleneck Blues Guitar* instructional video, cued to a scene of Bukka White playing a lap-style "Poor Boy" with a metal rod slide. Bedecked in a splendid silk three-piece, B.B. offered a warm handshake and settled into a chair.

fathers and Sons
B.B. and Billy

by Jas Obrecht

Billy: Word's out that you're opening a nightclub on Beale Street.

B.B.: Yes, it's called B.B. King's Blues Club. I'll be playing at the opening soon.

What led you to choose that location?

B.B.: I started from Memphis. Beale Street was very good to me in the beginning. When I came to Memphis from Mississippi, the first place I thought of, because of hearing so much about it, was Beale Street. I come to find out that Beale Street was like a college of learning. You had *everything* goin' on [*laughs*]. Beale Street was like a little town all of its own. Good musicians in the park playing various styles of music. In fact, the first time I ever heard a black guy play a Hawaiian steel guitar was there in Beale Street Park. He was playing the steel like a lot of the country people. It drove me crazy!

Billy: Let's show that little piece of film we peeked at, which shows someone you know playing lap-style slide. [*Starts video.*]

B.B.: Bukka White! That's my cousin. [*Laughs heartily.*] Thank you! Old traditional blues song. I sure appreciate this. You don't know what you're doin' to me.

Billy: He's got some real power in his forearm; the way he's shaking that thing takes some strength.

B.B.: He was a big guy. Not just fat like I am, but *big.*

Had you seen people in the Delta playing that style?

B.B.: Yeah, that's what I grew up with. That's why I feel that I've got stupid fingers, because I could never do it. I could *never* do it. It's sort of like trying to play the piano—my right hand, pretty good. The left hand, it just seems like the only reason I've got it is to help the other one out.

When you first moved to Memphis, you reportedly lived with Bukka for ten months.

B.B.: Yeah, I suppose so. He was working over at Lauderdale and Vance at a place called Newberry Equipment Company. He got me a job working with him. We used to make tanks that they used in service stations, what they put the fuel in down underneath the pumps. Yeah, that's what we were doin'. These big transfer trucks that carry fuel from place to place—we made those too.

Billy: You were playing on the evenings or weekends?

B.B.: Mostly weekends. I would go out with him sometime [*nods to Bukka*]. When I first came to Memphis, I kind of left in a hurry because [*laughs*]. . . . This is a funny story. I was a tractor driver in Mississippi, and there was nine of us that drove the tractors on the whole big plantation. I was considered pretty good. See, if you were a slow learner, you was choppin' cotton—you'd pick cotton by hand. But if you a pretty fast learner or you want to advance, first you plow the mules and then you learn to drive the tractor. Once you drive the tractors, man, you *in*; that's doin' it. You're kind of pampered a little bit when you're a tractor driver. You big stuff. Well, I wanted to be a tractor driver, so when I was about 14, man, I was a regular hand at it.

At the beginning in that part of the Delta, the old houses was way up off the ground because the Mississippi River would flood around there. So the boss' house was way up, and when he moved to town, that left this building to be something like a tractor barn, and we'd put the noses of all nine tractors underneath it. The tractor has a big muffler, and exhaust comes up through the top of about the center of the engine.

Billy: The pipe's sticking out.

B.B.: Right. When a tractor has been running a long time, usually it's hot. So you use magnetos on it for your fire. You have a battery to start it, but the magneto runs it. Well, when you cut it off after it's been running a long time, a lot of times it will backfire. It'll do two or three times back or forward. If it's in *gear.* . . .

Billy: Oh, no. I know what's coming.

B.B.: [*Laughs.*] I thought you'd get it. This particular evening, boy, I'd been flyin' all day, man, and everything was cool. I'm thinking about a lady I'm going to go see that night, ran the tractor up like we usually do, cut it off, get off there, and that sucker turned over a few times more. And when it did, under the house it went! That broke off the exhaust. Scared me so bad—I knew my boss was going to have a fit! His name was Johnson Barrett, I love him, but I knew he was going to have a fit. I didn't go to see the girl. I got me a bus, and I left and went to where Bukka was that night. Now, that was the first time I went to Memphis. I stayed away for about ten months, you're right. But then I started to thinking about it, because I missed my family and I missed everything. So I went back down there and told him what happened. He laughed then. I told him, "I'm sorry, and I came back to pay for it," which I did. I stayed there a year. I left legitimately the next year, which was the last of '47. I went back to Memphis, and *that's* when I started living on my own.

I'd been listening to Sonny Boy Williamson, the harmonica player on the radio. He used to be on a station in Helena, but at this time he'd moved to West Memphis, Arkansas. He had his little program on KWEM, I believe. I felt like I knew him. You know how we are with entertainers—you meet a person that you heard so much about . . .

Billy: . . .you know him.

B.B.: Yeah. So I went over that day, and I begged him to let me go on the radio with him. He made me audition, so I sing one of Ivory Joe Turner's tunes called "Blues At Sunrise," and he liked it. I didn't know anything about chords—still don't. But I had a good loud voice, strong, and I could keep a good beat. But if you thinking in terms of the changes and everything, I was terrible. Still is. [*Laughs.*] But he liked it. And that day, as fate would have it, he had two jobs. One was payin' him a couple of hundred dollars, maybe, where he was making $15 or $20 down at the 16th Street Grill. The lady's name was Miss Annie. He had 15 minutes, and when he was off the air, he called Miss Annie and asked her did she hear me. She said yes, and he said, "Well, I'm gonna send this boy down in my place tonight, and I'll be back tomorrow." He hadn't asked me anything! She said fine, and when I went there to play for Miss Annie that night, I found that West Memphis was then like a mini Las Vegas. Wide open.

In the front of her place they sold sandwiches, burgers, and stuff like that, but in the back of it they gambled, shot dice. My job was to try to entertain the people that was up front. Me being young, slim, and crazy about the girls. And I could holler real loud then, man. So she said, "You know, the people seem to like you. If you can get on the radio like Sonny Boy is, I'll give you this job. You play six nights a week, you have a day off. $12 a day, room and board." Well, man, I didn't know there was that much money in the world! Drivin' a tractor, when I thought I was big stuff, you made $22.50 a week. But she was gonna pay me *$12 a night*? And them girls?

Billy: That's why we got into this business!

What were you playing?

B.B.: I was playing anything you mention, but nothin' right. During that time Louis Jordan was very popular, Dinah Washington, Roy Brown. I could mention a lot of people that was popular in the vein of stuff that I could do. I never did any of it right, but my way of doin' it was me, and it came off pretty good.

Were you performing by yourself?

B.B.: Yeah, I had a guitar with a DeArmond pickup.

Billy: Just the add-on kind, wasn't it?

B.B.: Yeah, you just put it on. I had me a Gibson amplifier and an old black Gibson guitar, the first one I ever had with the f-holes in it. And, man, that was the thing at that time.

Not long after that, you started to record.

B.B.: Yeah. After Miss Annie telling me that if I could get on the radio like Sonny Boy was that she would give me the job, that's when I first heard about WDIA in Memphis. That was the first all-black-operated station. So I went over there a couple of days after I had talked with her, and I saw Nat Williams on the air. I actually had started off singing as a gospel singer, so I was pretty up on radio stuff. So I asked for Nat Williams, this black disc jockey in the picture window. His question was, "What can I do for you, young fella?" I said, "Well, I'd like to make a record, and I'd like to go on the radio." So he said, "Maybe we can help you with one; I don't know about the other." So he called Mr. Ferguson, the general manager, and Mr. Ferguson said, "Yeah. I think we can." So that *very evening* they put me on the radio, doing ten minutes with just me and the guitar. Now, that's without the amplifier. And would you know, they was gonna start a competitive product to what Sonny Boy was advertising over in West Memphis.

Billy: Flour?

B.B.: No, no. See, when he left Helena, that was the end of the *King Biscuit Time.* When he came to West Memphis, he was advertising for a tonic called Hadacol. Well, Mr. Ferguson was starting a new tonic called Pepticon. And that's what I was introducing.

What exactly was it?

Billy: A little of everything.

B.B.: Yeah. I never did really find out what Pepticon actually was until about eight years ago; somebody sent me a bottle of it. But I know we used to sell it like there wasn't gonna be no more. Come to find out it was 12 percent alcohol! [*Laughs.*]

Billy: Somebody was feeling good!

B.B.: Some of those church people were having a good time with it. I used to go out on the truck with the salesmen on the weekends, and man, they'd give me like $100, $150 sometimes, according to how much they sell. I'd be on the top of the truck singing, "Pepticon sure is good/Pepticon sure is good/You can get it anywhere in your neighborhood!" That's how it started, really.

Billy: Going back to West Memphis, I had heard stories about the wildness. I mean, West Memphis was it, man.

B.B.: Yeah, it was really good. I loved it. I really did.

Billy: There are still guys today that talk about it. In fact, you can drive down that old main street, and it hasn't changed too much. You can pick up the feeling. There's still something about it.

PHOTO: BILL REITZEL

"People'd ask me to play a gospel song. And when I'd play it, they'd always pat me on the shoulder, but they never tip. But dudes who would ask me to play a blues song would always tip, man, give me a beer. Man, they'd yell at everybody else: 'Don't you see this boy playin'? Give him something!'"

—B.B. King

B.B.: Memphis was a bit conservative. They didn't believe in having racetracks and all that, so they put it right over in West Memphis, and all the money and everything would go over there on the weekends. So they had gambling and all that, as long as they had a particular sheriff that they kept in there for a long time.

Billy: Was there other live music?

B.B.: Yeah. See, it wasn't just this particular little place. Anybody that was all right with the sheriff and the city government was okay, okay? That make sense? And there was a big white place out there where they really had good music all the time because they could afford to have the best—black, white, or any type of entertainment you could bring. What you have to remember, though, was that during this time it was still segregation, but when we went to that club, there was no segregation. You couldn't get out on the floor and dance, but you could have all the fun you could playing the music. Everybody get together and you talk, spin yarns as we usually did. The people out there was doing their thing, and we did ours in the back. But a few of the better clubs were black clubs where whites would come to them.

Billy: That's so peculiar. Try as you might to keep a lid on a good time, you can't do it. When people want to have a good time . . .

B.B.: . . . they will have a good time.

Billy: It's gonna be there.

B.B.: And I'll tell you, had it not been for that, my life would have been very slow—very, very slow. I loved it.

Billy: In fact, there is still a faction of people who, if they had their choices, would relive those times in West Memphis, particularly the '40s up to the '50s.

B.B.: Oh, yeah.

Was Beale Street similarly wild?

B.B.: Not really. The guys would have what we called little turn-row crap games or something like that, but if a cop caught you, you were in big trouble! But it was always something going on. You had the One Minute Cafe where you could go in and eat for 15¢, man. I mean, *really* eat: bowl of chili, nickel's worth of crackers [*laughs*], and what we call a bellywash—something like an Orange Crush drink. Man, you could live, I mean, really *live*. Sunbeam Mitchell's was one of the established places for music, so you'd have the best traveling musicians coming through. Let's assume that we were going through town: We'd go to Mitchell's, because we'd have a chance to see the best and find out what's goin' on in the city. That's where you get your information. Kind of like when I used to come to Houston, I'd go to the Fifth Ward and go to Club Matinee.

Well, Memphis was like that. You had several pawnshops. You used to keep a couple of good rings, a good tie pin, and a pair of good shoes, so if you got broke, you go down and pawn them. They know you coming back, because ain't nobody else gonna wear your shoes! Clothing and food and good music of all kinds. You had gospel, find a little spot over here where a guy's preachin', find another over here where some guy's sittin' on the stool playing his guitar, over further some guy's gambling. You may have a few pickpockets. You had some of *everything* going on in the area of three blocks.

Billy: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I've been told that in comparison to West Memphis, which was a different scene, Beale Street was wide open too, but in a stricter sense. There was a police department keeping everybody in line.

B.B.: Yeah.

Billy: You didn't want to act up. Beale Street was controlled.

Did old-time country blues mix with electric blues on Beale Street?

B.B.: Well, see, I didn't know the difference at that time. You had a chance to see people that you'd never seen before; you'd just hear about them. But on Beale Street, he was just another person. It's kind of like if we walked in a room now with Springsteen or the Beatles or U2 or the Rollin' Stones—we all people. You don't see them as if you're out there and don't get a chance to rub elbows with them. On Beale Street, guys like me was lookin' up, but the other guys were just, "Hey, there's old so-and-so. How you doin', man?" But it was a big thing for guys like myself that just came from Mississippi. I had a chance to see Muddy Waters, all the guys that was big then—Sonny Boy Williamson. And then you got a chance to see guys with big bands, like Duke Ellington coming through. Count Basie. And all these people would patronize or fool around on Beale Street.

During that time it was segregated, with the exception of certain places. Now, in the radio station where I worked at, there was no segregation. None. When you came in there, your title was whomever you were. If you was an elderly person, it was Mr. so-and-so or Mrs. so-and-so, but other than that, you were who you are and you was treated with respect. But when you walked out, it was like leaving the Embassy [*laughs*]. It was a different story.

Beale Street was similar, because everybody—white and black—that lived and worked there was accustomed and used to the people being there. Duke Ellington and Count Basie or Louis Armstrong was known not only to the blacks, but to the whites as well. They had the Hippodrome and a few other places where the slick black promoters would bring in one of the big artists, and they would play two shows—one for whites and one for blacks, and they made money. Those were the days, though, man. If you were a little entertainer, you could always stand in the background. Like when the big guys be on the stage, you'd be in the wings lookin'. So it was some beautiful moments, some moments that I'll cherish and forever love.

You think that you got drug problems today, but it was there too. Most of the people would say, "If you want to make it, don't do that there. See what that dude doin' on the corner? Leave it alone," like that. It was sort of controlled, but people did do it.

Some of the jug band musicians fell into that.

B.B.: There was several great jug bands there. You know, in each society of music or whatever, you always got what I call the hierarchy, the people at the top that's the best at what they do, whether it be a boxer or a singer. So whenever one of these guys came around, like the great jug bands, everybody move over there where they can check that one out. I remember, for instance, Lightnin' Hopkins. When I first met Lightnin', it was in Memphis, met him there on Beale Street.

Was there something called headcutting?

B.B.: Well, you could call it that [*laughs*]. People do this now. When a great musician would come to town, like a jazz musician, well, all of the guys would be laying around him trying to cut his head. Well, we had some giant musicians there. The Newborn family was terrific. The old man, which was Phineas [*pronounced fine-us*] Newborn, played drums, and his son Phineas [*pronounced fin-ee-us*], they called him, played the keyboard. And he was *bad*—when I say bad, I mean terrific. And then he had a brother named Calvin, who's still around and plays back in Memphis. Terrible, man, I mean, he plays some guitar! And then you got Fred Ford, Bill Harvin, Herman Green—a lot of people that would be waitin' on you when you come to town. You supposed to be a musician, they want to get you on that stage up at Sunbeam's, and then they started calling Gershwin tunes and stuff like that.

Billy: Oh, lord, look out! The tough stuff.

B.B.: So if you wasn't trained or didn't know tunes pretty well, you'd see a guy start taking his horn down—something was wrong with his horn—and the other guy breaks a string on his guitar, and they move. A guy came to town named Charles Brown. I'm still crazy about Charles even today. The guy who made "Merry Christmas, Baby" is the one I'm talking about. Well, they knew Charles was a blues singer and a blues player, but they didn't know that Charles had been to college and majored in music. Nobody knew that.

Billy: Whoa!

B.B.: So Charles came to town. He had Wayne Bennett playing guitar, and a few other people. That night after the show they kept begging Charles to come up to Sunbeam's. They get him to get on the stage, and then they started calling "Lady Be Good" and any of the good jammin' Gershwin tunes, because those were the real jazz standards. That night when Charles Brown finally figured out what they was trying to do to him, he called "Body And Soul," which has got *a lot* of changes. When he called the tune, all the guys figured they really gonna cut him now. But then he started to modulate chromatically.

Billy: Giving it to 'em!

B.B.: So a guy done learned it in one key, and now Charles is taking them through it all chromatically. Then I started seeing guys who had something wrong with his horn and such. Finally it wound up with Charles Brown, the bass, and the drums [*laughs*]. That's the best example I ever seen, and it was really fun to see that happen.

You recorded with some of the Newborns early on.

B.B.: My very first record, the whole family was on it. I made my first record for Bullet Recording Company out of Nashville. I had old man Phineas on the drums, his son Phineas Newborn Jr., was on keyboard, Calvin was on guitar, and a lady was playin' trombone—I can't think of her name now. It had Ben Branch on tenor sax, Thomas Branch on the trumpet, and Tuff Green, bass. It was four sides, and we did them at the radio station in the largest studio, Studio A. "Take A Swing With Me," "How Do You Feel When Your Baby Packed Up To Go," "Miss Martha King," and "I Got The Blues"—the first four sides I ever recorded.

Let's play another one of your early sides, "Mistreated Woman."

B.B.: [*Laughs.*] That's on Modern Records—or RPM, really. That's me. [*At this point the solo starts.*] Yeah, that's the old guy.

Billy: Gibson guitar?

B.B.: Yeah. Crazy about T-Bone Walker. Crazy about Lowell Fulson.

Charlie Christian?

B.B.: Oh, yes. God, yeah. Well, Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt—those are my jazz players. I don't know, this is going to sound a little weird to you, maybe, but I've always been conscious of being put

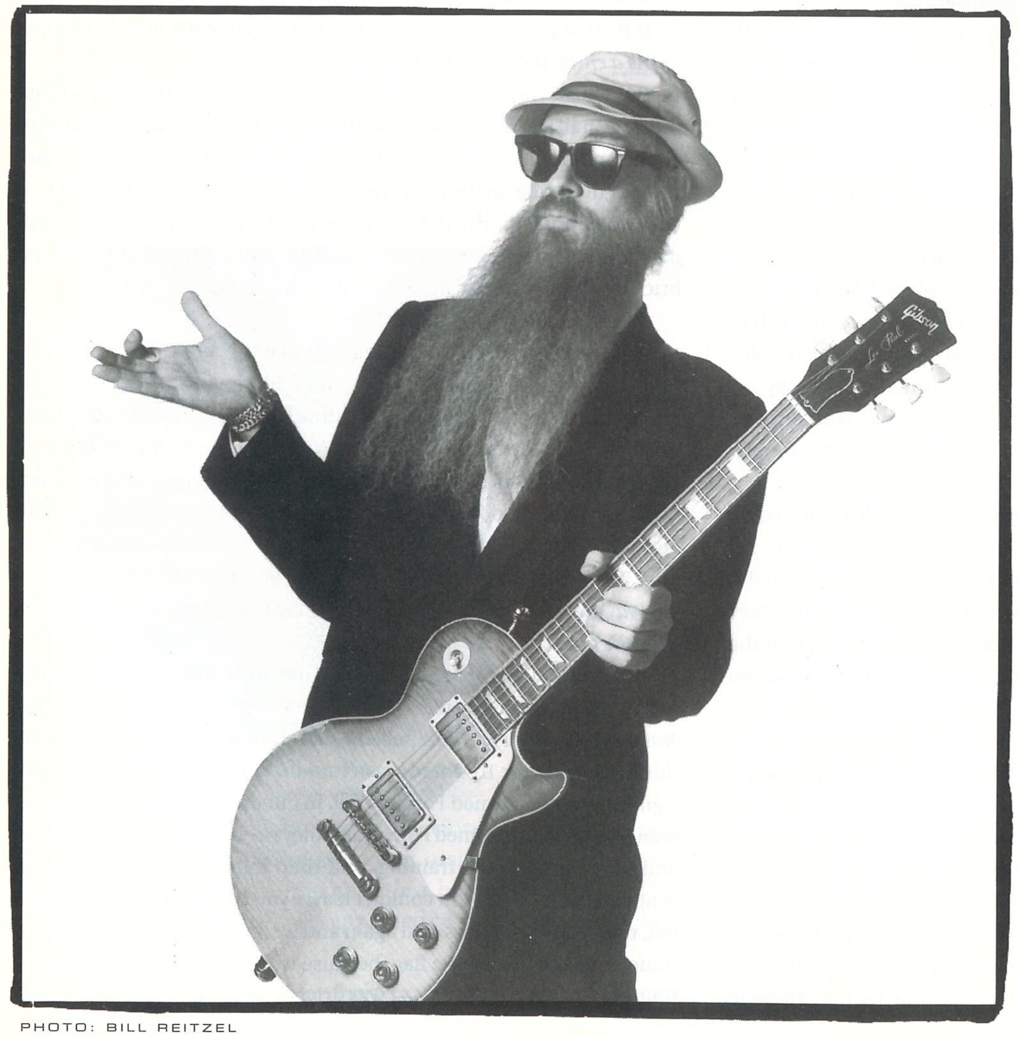


PHOTO: BILL REITZEL

"So many have cited the B.B. touch; so many have made references to the B.B. influence. It's [B.B.'s] sound and approach to soloing that has made the guitar such a lead instrument. It's really inspired a lot of people to learn how to improvise and solo."

—Billy Gibbons

down as a blues player. So I've had one thing that I always tried to keep in mind: It's always better to know and not need than to need and not know. I always like to know more than people think I know, so I practice hard trying to be able to do things that nobody would expect me to do. That's how I learned to fly airplanes; nobody ever thought that I could be a pilot, so I learned to be a pilot. I learned to do many other things simply because coming from Mississippi usually was the first downer, you know: "Yeah, man, this dude from Mississippi, still got clay mud on his shoes," stuff like that. It's still that way. So I started to say, "Yeah, I'm from Mississippi, and I'm proud of it." And today I'm very proud to be a Mississippian—very, very proud. Because I've been put down for trying to be something else. It wasn't a matter of just being something else—I just wanted to do what I did better than it had been done before. I felt that if I could do it there, I could do it at the White House, do it in New York, do it anyplace, and it could be thought of as being artistically well done.

Billy: Through your graciousness over the years, you've become a cornerstone for so many people by knowing more than what people thought you knew.

B.B.: Well, it was satisfactory to me, in a way of speaking. All right, I don't speak English well, but if I go to Spain, I'll try to learn a couple of words. Any different country, I'll try to learn a couple words. So when I hear people talking in Japan and they say a few things, I'll pick it up. It's the same thing musically. If I hear you play [*indicates Billy*], I may not be able to play what I hear you play, but I'll know a little something about it because I'm *listening*. Got my ears on it. Same thing with him [*indicates Jas*] or whoever. Well, that is a peace of mind for B.B. King—maybe not to anybody else, but to me. And this is not something you do once in a while. Each day I've got my ears kind of cocked, learnin'. If I could do what you do or what somebody else do, I'd find myself saying, "You sound so good like that, but I wouldn't sound that good, so I better try it *this* way." But it's still your idea.

Billy: Let me indulge in a little complimentary flattery by pointing to the single-string soloing on that track we just played. So many have cited the B.B. touch; so many people have made references to the B.B. King influence. I would say that it's your sound and approach to soloing that has made the guitar such a lead instrument. It's really inspired a lot of people to learn how to improvise and solo. Wouldn't you say that was just developing for the guitar around the time you recorded that track in '50?

B.B.: It's a funny thing. During that time, guitars hadn't really come into being, if you will. Excuse the word, but it was a bitch to try to get a good guitar at that time—just to try and *get* one. And when you did get one, you better hold onto it—don't loan it to nobody. If you did, they didn't come back, most of 'em. So yes. Nobody had any idea that the guitar would become what it is today. Where I grew up at, there was no other instrument that was available to you, really, but maybe a harmonica. And everybody don't want to blow everybody's harmonica. In my area, they couldn't afford keyboards of any kind. You couldn't afford no pianos or organ. I guess I've only seen an organ in maybe three or four homes in an area of 150 homes, and those was what we called—an old word down there—*uppity* [*laughs*]. They had the uppity blacks as well as the whites, see. So very few people had those. Only time I ever seen a piano or organ was when I went to church. So when I would go over to somebody's house, there usually was an old guitar laying on the bed. And the only strings I ever knew about at that time, we bought them at a drugstore, and they was called Black Diamonds.

Red packs.

Billy: Or the glass jar, if you really want to go back.

B.B.: Yeah. And your *E* string, man, was about as big as my *G* string is today. I use a .010 for my *E*, a .013 for my *B*, and a .017 for my *G* string. And those *E* strings then had to be close to .014.

Billy: At least. Somebody gave me a set of Black Diamonds, right out of the box—wires!

B.B.: Now, when you break one of those strings, then you would take baling wire—the wire that you bale hay with—or the wire they used to wrap broomsticks, and we would use that for strings. You take that and tie it onto the string. Once you tie it on, you put that wire on your tuner, so from here to here [*indicates from about the fifth fret to the bridge*] you got string.

Billy: You couldn't play down below that? Oh, man!

B.B.: You could never play down low. But a lot of people didn't do it anyway—in fact, my friend Gatemouth still don't! So you take a clamp [capo]—when you could afford one—and put it on between the end of where the string is broke, so you got good clear string. And if you couldn't do that—in most cases, we didn't—you get a pencil or a piece of stick that's straight across, and you put it on there, take some string, tie it down, and that's your clamp.

A homemade capo.

B.B: Yeah. It's like the nut of your guitar.

Billy: Hope that you sing real high for the rest of the week!

B.B.: [*Laughs.*] Well, we learned to do things. We let [tuned] it down!

As a child, did you ever make a one-string?

B.B.: Yeah. We take the same cord from around that broom, and you put a big nail up there [*points about five feet up the wall*]. Take another one and put it down there [*about three-and-a-half feet lower*], and you put the string on the nails. Then you take something like a brick—we always found that a brick was really good for sustaining tones—put it in down there between the string and the wall, tighten it, put another brick up there on top, tighten it, and then you bang on it.

Would you play with a slide?

B.B.: I can't play slide on my guitar today! [*Laughs.*] Still can't. Another thing we used to do is take an inner tube—you don't find 'em often now, but most of the cars at that time had inner tubes inside of the tire. So when one of those would blow out, you'd take the rubber and stretch it. You'd make a board and put small bricks or pieces of wood on it, just like you do your guitar, and you could play that. You could also take a stick and wet it, put it across, and it sounds similar to a violin. You leave it to kids, boy—we'd find a way to make music!

Was there a moment when it became clear that you were destined to play the blues?

B.B.: Yeah. It was after I had been in the Army when I was 18. Working on the plantation where we lived, we was growing produce for the Armed Forces. You was compelled, you was drafted, as you became 18 during World War II. There wasn't no ifs and ands—you went and signed up for the Armed Forces. Well, in our area they claimed we was doing things for the Armed Forces, and they needed us there. So we went and took partial basic training, and then they reclassified you and sent you back home. You couldn't leave; you had to stay there. If you left, then you was reclassified again and went back in. But even if I die tomorrow, I couldn't get a flag, because we didn't complete the basic training. I came back home—I was driving a tractor at this time—and I started to go on the street corners to sit and play on a Saturday evening after I got off work.

I would always try to sit on the corner of main streets, where we get blacks and whites coming right past us. I would sit and play; I didn't ask nobody for anything—I would *hope!* Now, I was singing gospel with a quartet; we were pretty good. We were like an opening act for groups like the Soul Stirrers, Spirit Of Memphis, and like that. But for some reason, the guys never seemed to want what I wanted. I wanted to move up a little bit with it, and everybody was very conscious of their families, which I can understand. But I guess I wasn't as family-orientated as they were. I kept thinking that we could go off and do like the Golden Gate Quartet and many of the other groups. Every autumn, after our crops was gathered, I would say, "Hey, now is the time to go," and we'd make plans to leave and go to Memphis or someplace where we could record. But every time that would happen, they'd say, "No. We didn't do too well. The crops didn't. . . . So we won't do it."

Anyway, while sitting on the street corners playing, people'd ask me to play a gospel song. And when I'd play it, they'd always pat me on the shoulder or something and compliment me very highly: "Son, you're good. If you keep it up, you're gonna be all right one day." But they never tip. But dudes who would ask me to play a *blues* song would always tip, man, give me a beer. Man, they'd yell at everybody else: "Don't you see this boy playin'? Give him something!" Instead of making my $22.50 a week on the plantation, I'd sometimes make, gosh, maybe $100—at least $50 or $60.

Billy: You're speaking of the war years now?

B.B.: Yeah. So these people would always give me nice tips, man. That's when the motivation started. That's when I started deciding I would play the blues.

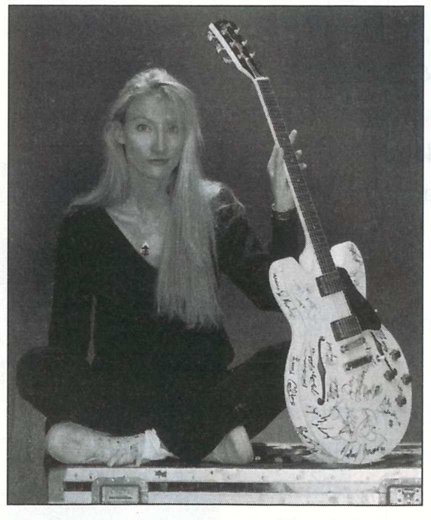
What were the first blues 78s that knocked you out?

B.B.: My aunt used to buy records like kids do today, and some of her collection was Blind Lemon, Lonnie Johnson. She had Robert Johnson, Bumble Bee Slim, and Charley Patton. I could just go on and name so many she had. But my favorites turned out to be Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson. I liked Robert and all the rest of them, but those were my favorites.

What's the appeal of Blind Lemon?

B.B.: I wished I could tell you, because if I could, I'd do it! [*Laughs.*] He had something in his phrasing that's so funny. He had a way of double-time playing. Say, like, one-two-three-four, and then he'd go [*in double-time*] one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four. And the time was still right there, but double-time. And he could come out of it so easy. And then when he would resolve something, it was done so well. I've got some of his records now—I keep them on cassette with me. But he'd come out of it so smooth. His touch is different from anybody on the guitar—still is. I've practiced, I tried, I did everything, and still I could never come out with the sound as he did. He was majestic, and he played just a regular little 6-string guitar with a little round hole. It was unbelievable to hear him play. And the way he played with his rhythm patterns, he was way before his time, in my opinion.

On behalf of Gibson Guitars, Gypsy Karns donated this 335 to the T.J. Martell Foundation for Leukemia, Cancer and AIDS, one of Gibson's numerous gestures in their continuous support of the Foundation's research. Linda Archer and Scott Weinstein gave me the 335 to create a "Signature Gibson" for silent auction. John Stix gave me guidance throughout the signature collection process. Michael Borwegen, an infinite source of assistance, *(and innovative chord progressions!)* gave me countless hours of his time. The "Signature Gibson", accompanied by authenticating photographs of each musician signing, is complete and auction-ready thanks to all your help, Linda, Scott, John and Michael. On behalf of both myself and T.J. Martell, I wish to thank those *directly* responsible for creating this signature guitar: the musicians as well as their managers, family members or friends, who, as vital liaisons gave me the opportunity to obtain many of the signatures:



This specially signed Gibson 335 guitar will be on display during the January 1995 NAMM Convention at the T.J. Martell Booth.

Jeff Berke
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Kevin Burns, Bill Graham Mgmt.
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...the gracious generosity of Lorena Alexander and Chris Gentri.

For further information or to bid on the guitar, please call Linda Archer (818) 891-0234 or Joanne Stanulonis (310) 858-1547.
Bids will be accepted prior to the January 1995 NAMM Convention.

Which of his songs would you recommend for guitarists?

B.B.: [Sings in a gentle voice]

"See that my grave be kept clean,
See that my grave be kept clean,
See that my grave be kept clean,
See da-da-da-da-da-da"

That's one of them. Lightnin' Hopkins did it, and many people have done it since. But that's where it came from. [Resumes singing]

"It's long road ain't got no end,
Long road ain't got no end,
Long road ain't. . . ."

Oh, one other part:

"Three white horses in a line,
Three white horses in a line,
Three white horses in a line,
Gonna take me to my burying ground"

Something like that.

Billy: Since this interview is centered around Memphis and the early years, I'd like to cite a personal favorite vision that has recently come out. The two B.B. King albums that come over from England that have the picture of you . . .

B.B.: . . .wearin' shorts, huh? [*Laughs heartily.*] Well, you know, I used to think that I was kind of hot stuff. My cousin Bukka White told me something that has stayed with me over all these years. I mentioned how we used to be put down as blues singers. I've quite often said if you was a black person singing the blues, you black twice. And if you a white person, you black once. Because people usually will put you down. Like, if you from the country, people was, "Aw, look at the little country dude." And if you from the city, country people won't talk so much about it, but they say, "Well, he from the city, he think he's something." Well, my cousin Bukka White used to say, "You see how I dress? [*Tugs lapels of his suit.*] When you dress like this, it's like you're going to try to borrow some money. The banker don't know who you are, and the people that you're talkin' to don't know what you are. So you always dress like that, and people don't know, because you look clean and neat, and they may loan you the money. But if you come up and you're not dressed nice, you look like you're a beggar. But dressed up, the white people see you, and you look like a preacher or something like that, so you get by a little easier." I started to do it, and I started to notice that made a difference—always. After that I started a trend for my own band, and we sort of set a pace like that. I got used to doing it, and I like it. Anyway, there was something else I started to tell you a little while ago. . . .

Billy: About the Bermuda shorts.

B.B.: Yeah! Thank you. Well, I thought at that time that this was kind of slick, you know.

Billy: It was slick. To this day.

B.B.: Yeah, but if I had realized what my legs looked like then, I probably wouldn't have done it. I had seen guys from Australia wearing short pants, and I thought it was cool.

Billy: In fact, in that photo you're playing a Gibson—it could have been a Switchmaster or the ES-5. Big-bodied.

B.B.: Yeah, I think I had what they called the 400.

Billy: Did the big bodies give you much trouble with feedback?

B.B.: I didn't think of it so much at that time. T-Bone Walker had one that had three pickups, and I was crazy about it. Crazy about him. Well, as I said, during that time it was hard to get and keep a good guitar, so the early '50s is when the Fenders first came out. So I had one of the early Fenders. I had the Gretsch, I even had a Silvertone from Sears, Roebuck. So I had any kind of guitar you can probably think of. But when I found that little Gibson with the long neck, that did it. That's like finding your wife forever. This is she! I've stayed with it from then on. Now, a lot of times you may buy a guitar just to keep at home, but to play—for me, that was it. They had the ES-335, and then they had a new idea for the 355, and I've been crazy again. So that's the one I've held onto. But I've tried guitars through the years—you name them, I've probably had one.

Billy: You've been credited with starting so many fads, trends, crazes, and things that have gone way beyond that now because they're carved in stone as just the way to do it. And people keep digging up relics of the past: Just recently a friend of mine sent me a postcard that's a reprint of a publicity shot of the B.B. King Orchestra. The band members are lined up, and you're leading the pack, standing in front of the bus. Everybody is just natty, neat as a pin. It's the definitive vision of the way an outfit should look. And it's coming back around to this.

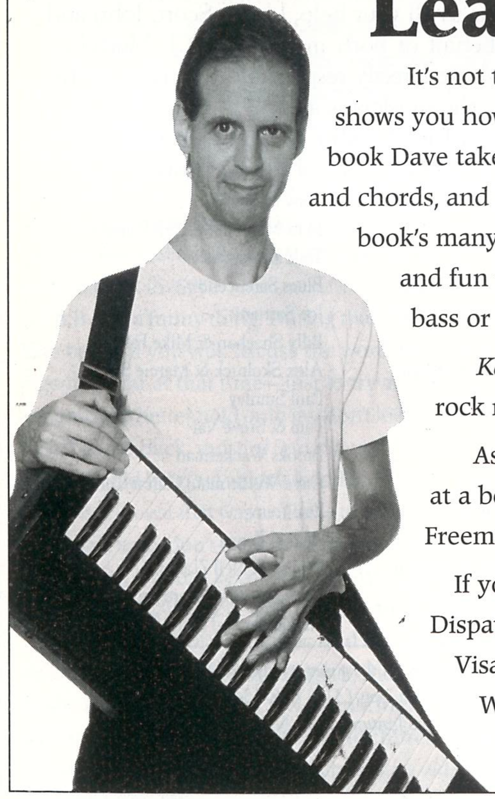
B.B.: Yeah, I remember that. We took that picture in front of my first old bus. That was a pretty big band then, about 12 or 13 pieces. I thought myself big stuff because we could play the blues like I thought we should, and then we could venture into other little things from time to time. This was '55.

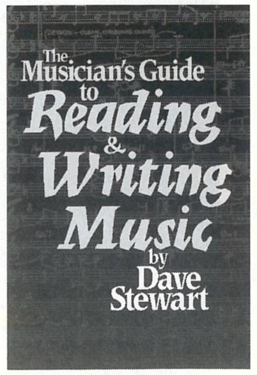
Billy: Well, you had the strength to be that leader.

B.B.: I've enjoyed doing what I've done. I've had so much happiness from so many people.

Billy: It shows.

B.B.: If you'd ask me 40 years ago—this is 41 years I'm into it now—would I even be living today, I would have bet you odds no. But so many good things have happened. I'm happier today, this very day, than I've ever been in my life. I've had so many wonderful things happen. And I'll tell you what, you've made me happy just sitting here talking with you. This is a real treat. I never dreamed this would ever happen. I really thank you. I've been asked before if there was anything I would do differently if I had this life to start again. And there are only two things I can think of that I would change: I would finish high school and go to college and try to learn more about the music, and I wouldn't marry until after 40!





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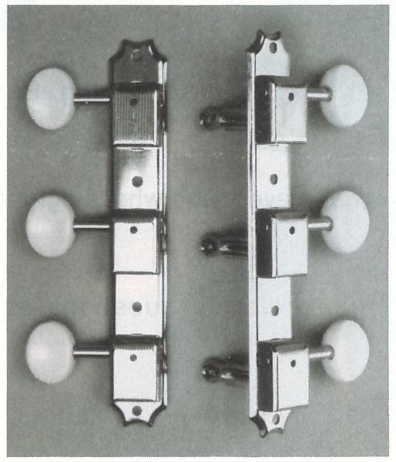

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talking about Lucille

He would sound like himself on any guitar, because it's B.B. King and his music—not so much the guitar—that's truly important. But on behalf of those of us who've spent hundreds of hours listening to this great bluesman and learning his style, I thought it would be beneficial to actually play Lucille and report on the type of action and response that lets B.B. do his thing. Perhaps these measurements and observations will help other players find what's right for them. At first B.B. seemed a little apprehensive about answering questions about the guitar rather than music. He began our conversation with a disclaimer:

by Dan Erlewine

Lucille
King

I'm like a test pilot for the airplane—he don't know much about it, he just flies it. An amp and a guitar, I don't know much about 'em. I just play—or at least try.

Have you ever been a do-it-yourselfer, adjusting and setting-up your guitars?

Not too much, but some. I've been pretty satisfied with the way they're made by Gibson. I have done some little things, like setting the bridge intonation.

Did you help design Lucille?

Yes, a few little things. The ES-355 is practically the same thing, except that I wanted a thinline, semi-hollow, but also *solid*-body guitar with no f-holes, and they did that for me. So Lucille's like the big brother to the Les Paul. At one time I suggested that they narrow the neck a bit, and they did that for me. Also, the nut was a little different—I believe it was made of brass. With the current model they've returned to the usual white Gibson nut. And that's one of the things that's a little different.

How many Lucilles do you own?

Well, this is Lucille the 15th. I've given some of them away, and been ripped off for others—I mean, people have stolen them. Couple of times, they've come in the dressing room when I'd be talking to someone, and Lucille'd be in the next room. The last time, somebody went in that next room and got it. But luckily the sheriff was able to find it. A young fella had taken it home, and the funny thing was, when the sheriff came up to his house, he said "Oh, did you come for the guitar?" [*Laughs.*] Yeah, that was the last time, but I've got about five or six of the Lucille model at this time.

"An amp and a guitar—I don't know much about 'em. I just play."

Do you own any acoustics?

I've got two or three of them around home. One is an old National with the tin body and a resonator. I've got another one, but I can't think of the name now. The Gibson company is planning to give me one—at least one of the gentlemen there said they were going to.

One of the new flat-tops from Montana?

Mm hmm, and that's what I want—one that's acoustic, but that you still can amplify. [*Author's Note: Ren Ferguson, the man credited for the excellent guitars being built in Montana at this time, is making B.B. a very special J-2000 with extensive abalone inlay. The flat-top will be a soft-shouldered, round cutaway with rosewood back and sides and a spruce top. The scale-length will most likely be a 24-3/4", like Lucille. This new "Lucille" will have a bridge transducer pickup and on-board electronics.*]

Do you play acoustic at home ?

Not often, but I do. I would rather play it at home [*laughs*] than let anybody hear me trying to play it out.

Do you play fingerstyle at all?

Oh no, I'm not that good—always a pick. In the early years I didn't have a pick. You know, I'm not as talented as a lot of people are; they can take the plectrum or use their fingers. It's all I can do to use the plectrum. So if I try to *divide* the time between the two, I don't do so well! I see Chet Atkins and guys like that just go to town with it, but I'm not able to do that.

Do you travel with more than one Lucille?

Yes, but until about a year ago I always just carried one Lucille. Then my manager suggested that I carry two in case something happened.

Is there a favorite Lucille, or one that's the most broken-in?

No, not really. It's like if you were drivin' a car—say, a Ford or Volkswagon, what have you—and you had two of them. They're both the same thing; it's just that one maybe feels a little different than the other. But actually the guitars' necks are pretty near the same.

You played heavy strings for years. In the old days they didn't have the light rock 'n' roll strings.

The only strings I knew about in the beginning were called Black Diamonds, and gosh, it seemed to me that the first *E* string would have been the size of the *G* that I use today.

Could that have been what made your left hand so strong ?

I won't say it's *what* made my hand strong, but I can say it probably did help. Then all of a sudden 20 years later somebody said, "Hey, man, have you tried the slinkies?" I said: "What? [*Laughs.*] The slinkies?" A .009" set, you know. So I tried 'em once, and it was like I'm playing with *toys*, so I took them off because my hands had gotten used to a specific gauge. For another thing, I'm not the best with chords, but I like light jazz. And I like rock—you know, I like some of *all* of it—but I can't seem to get the *sound* of the chords that I want with a real light-gauge string.

Do you ever get sore fingers from bending?

Yeah, my fingers get a little tender, but I don't have corns [callouses] on my fingers, like most people. And the action's pretty high on Lucille, a little higher now than I usually like it to be. I prefer it a little closer. The only time that I'll have a corn is if I don't play for a while and then pick up the guitar—*then* I'll develop one. But usually my fingers stay very soft on the tips.

What fingers do you bend with?

A lot of people think it's only this one or that one, but I bend with all of 'em, and a lot with the third finger. The way I bend, I don't push it up or pull it—technically, you could say I'm just trilling. I bend with my little finger too. I guess, you know, I'm one of those guys that was never satisfied—never, never satisfied—so I was always tryin' to find something to add to what I was doing. So I didn't spend as much time practicing as I should have—still don't.

The Stratocaster is popular with all kinds of blues players. Have you ever messed around with one?

I had one of the first Fender guitars that came out.

The Strat?

If that's what it was [*chuckles*], I had one. You'll see a few of my early records with me holding it. But I believe it was a Telecaster.

When did you discover the semi-hollowbody guitar?

About '58 or so is when I got the first one, with the long neck—I believe it was called the ES-335 at the time. I got one of those, and I have liked them ever since. But my *first* Lucille was a little black Gibson acoustic guitar, and I used a DeArmond pickup on it to electrify. And my first amplifier, the very first one I ever had, was a little Gibson amplifier with something like about an 8" or 10" speaker in it—*one speaker.*

What amplifier would you recommend for small clubs?

I love the Fender Twin. When they first made the Twin, I used it all the time, because I never found another amp that satisfied me like it did. But when the company changed and went to a different type of amp during the '70s and '80s, then the sound somewhat changed too. So I started searching for something else, and that's when I found this Lab System, which is what I'm using now and which I like very much. Because with the Lab system I got a sound *similar* to the older Fender Twin, so I try to buy every Lab System I can find, because they stopped making them.

No more Fender Twins?

Oh, I still use the Twin too. Because with the Fender Twin, later on they returned to the old way of making them, and I again started to find the sound that I used to hear. You see, I didn't know much about the settings of those other amps, because I'm a three- or four-button guy, you know [*laughs*]. The volume, the bass, the treble, and reverb—and that's about me. So now, in my contracts, if they don't have a Lab System, which most often they don't, our contracts state that they must have a Fender Twin—and that's what I use all over the world. [*Author's note: Albert Garcia of Fender explains, "The Fender Twins that B.B. didn't like were models where they added things like master volume, gain control, and a more powerful output and power supply that upped the power from 85 watts to 100 and finally to 135 watts. I'm sure he couldn't get his sound with it, because it's too powerful for one thing. But now we have the '65 Twin Reissue—just like the original—with more simple controls, two channels, reverb, tremolo, and 85 watts."*]

Do you adjust the knobs on your guitar as you're playing?

Well, as you know, the guitar has tone controls as well as volume. The two front controls are volume for both pickups, and the rear controls are treble and bass. I use these controls all the time—up and down—according to the sound of my ear.

How about the settings of your amp?

My amp is turned up to the maximum, usually, as far as volume is concerned. If you were to think in terms of 1 to 10, the volume would be about 10, or maybe 8 or 9—not always *completely* wide open. It's according to how much balls it's got. If it's *really* hot, then about 8 for the volume. Now, I don't like a lot of bass since I can't hear it so well. Generally the bass would be between 5 and 6 most of the time. I have the treble up *all* the way practically, unless it's *very* hot—too hot for me—then it would be like around 7 or 8. But I prefer a lot of treble because I *can* hear treble, and with a good amp it usually cuts through pretty well. I like reverb, but not too much—just so it's not flat. So reverb would be about 2. That's the way I like the settings when it's a good amp, but I'm pretty rough on amps because I play pretty hard and I wear them out.

You wear them out?

Well, with the volume up strong—and I like a lot of feedback from time to time—that's pretty hard on an amp.

How do you get feedback?

I can find ways of getting feedback, which I can't explain really, but there are certain positions in which you can stand. You don't necessarily have to face the amp or have the guitar *toward* the amp. With this solidbody Lucille I can pretty well control feedback like I want. That feedback's pretty hard on an amp.

Do you have a special repairman or tech who works on your guitars, or do they go back to Gibson?

To Gibson, every time. After I've kept it for about a year or two, I usually will send Lucille back whenever she's startin' to wear a little bit. I get them to check her out, especially the frets.

Have you experimented with different fret wires?

No, this is the standard one that comes with the Lucille model, the wide oval [see measurements].

How often do you need a fret job?

About every four or five years, usually. I don't know, even though I slide up and down the fretboard a lot, I don't seem to wear them down like I've seen on some guys' guitars—I guess the frets are pretty good on them. I've known some guys to file their frets down to where the fret is *just* above the neck. You know, where it's just out enough to fret it. But I don't like that.

You can't bend on those, right?

Yeah, I could. I can *bend* on any of 'em. Man, you get me one and I'll bend 'em [*laughs*]—I don't care what kind it is.

Your adjustable Gibson TP6 tailpiece has the individual tuning screws removed. Why?

I don't like 'em, because they easily come out of tune for me. I took 'em off and threw 'em out! For some they may be good, but for me to have to reach back *here* [*points to tailpiece*] and tune, no! The next guitar, I plan to talk with Gibson and see if they can't just keep 'em off of mine. Another thing I like is the old style of tailpiece that holds on like a trapeze,

This article originally appeared in the June 1991 issue of Guitar Player.

so you just put the ball end of the string in the hole, and there it is. I'd like something like that. But if you ask about moving the bridge saddles, I do adjust them when the guitar seems to be out of tune with itself at times. I always check them at the 12th fret.

Do you use Lucille's Varitone switch much?

No, I hardly ever use it. Put it on full and just leave it there. To me, I can get a better sound mixing it myself.

Which pickup combination do you use most?

I leave the toggle switch in the middle most of the time. It's supposed to be stereo, right, so it's got two input jacks—one for mono and one for stereo. So generally the mono input jack is the one that I use most times with just a standard cord. It also has a stereo jack that uses a Y cord, so you can use two amps, right and left, and get the stereo sound with each amp working individually.

You mentioned that you like the long neck.

The guitar's got 22 frets on it. With the long neck joining the body way up, usually a guy with big hands like mine has no trouble going from here all the way down there to get it [*slides from nut up to the high* D]. You got that *D* way up there on the 22nd fret, so you're all the way from here to there with ease.

What do you wipe your strings with when you're all done for the night?

Most times I'm kinda lazy, I don't wipe 'em down because when I come off the stage generally somebody else brings it off, and a lot of times I forget to do it when I get to my room. When I get to my room some nights, I'm so tired I put Lucille in one corner and I go in the other. But when I can *think* of it, the best thing to do is wipe the guitar down—then it won't corrode or rust. And my hands perspire so much, if I don't wipe 'em down they rust.

"This is Lucille the 15th. I've given some away, and been ripped off for others."

What brand of strings do you use?

I use Ernie Ball's light top/heavy bottom. I once used Gibson; I *liked* the Gibson strings, and I'm kind of a loyal guy. But then they started making the wound *G*'s, which I *don't* like. A wound *G* is nice if you're playing jazz, but I like to bend the strings somewhat. And the wound *G* doesn't get the sound, to me, when I'm bending. I can bend, but it's not the sound I'm looking for. My high *E* string is a .010," sometimes .011"—I like 'em pretty heavy. A .013" generally, for the *B* string, and a .017" on the *G*. For the *D*, a .030"—I prefer a .032", but .030" usually comes in the set. The *A* string is a .045", and there's a .054" on the the bottom *E*. That's what I use.

Do you change strings yourself?

Always.

No guitar tech to do it for you?

I can't afford it! No, it's me and Lucille. In fact, I broke a string onstage last night, but I'm pretty good with changing them. Usually, I'll change before anybody really knows that I'm doing it.

Right while you're playing?

While I'm playing—never stop. I'll go into something that features somebody else, and if I'm playing a 12-bar thing, in 24 bars I've almost got it together—if it's a slow one.

Do you change strings for every show?

No. It's according to how much I'm playing. If I'm playing every night, about once a week. But if I break one, then I'll change the whole thing. It's like an old story about bears takin' corn out of the fields. If the bear had an armful of corn and he dropped one ear, he'd throw it all down and collect him another armful! [*Laughs.*] So that's the way I am about the guitar. I don't care if I changed last night, if I break one tonight, I'll take 'em all off and put a new set on.

You wind lots of string onto your tuners.

Again, I'm from the old school. We used to break strings so much, so you use it all! You wound it *all* up here [*points to peghead*], then if you break one, you still got more so you can pull it down and tie it on.

Do you run your strings through the post twice or have any special knots or ties?

No, I don't need to because I start to wind the strings from almost their beginning—for instance, like you take the average *E* string and pull it about an inch through—you can wind it about 12 times around there.

Maybe having that many windings is the key to staying in tune.

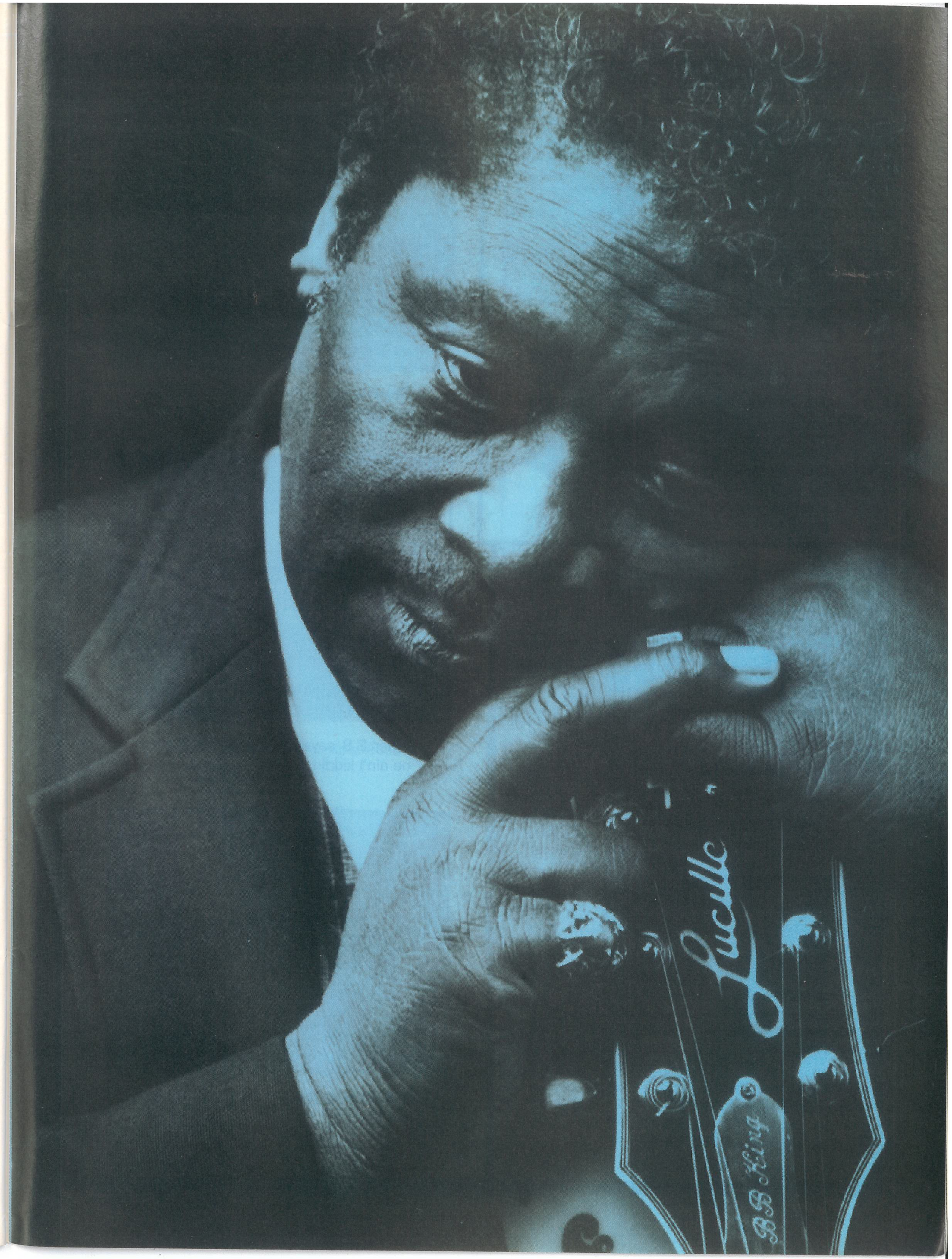
I don't know, but the tighter your string gets, the more it holds itself. My *B* string has about eight wounds, about six or seven for the *G* string, and if I am in a hurry, I can put one on very fast. The only one that gives me trouble is the big *E.* Windin' it together up there gives me a little trouble. But at one time they had—and I liked it—keys with little cranks that you could fold out and wind the tuner very fast. I used to have 'em on the 355. I'm going to get them on Lucille. [*Author's Note: These M-6 Gold Crank tuners are still available.*]

Do you ever practice or play along to records?

I'm pigheaded. I've never learned that well that way. I read a little slowly, but if I really want to learn, then I buy the lead sheet on it and I sit down and play it. And nowadays I put it in the computer and let the computer play it. But that's the way I learn songs mostly. I've never been able to sit down and play a tune and learn it from that.

Like everybody has with your music?

Well, I guess. I don't have the knowledge of chord patterns like most people do. So, seeing is believing—hearin' is deceiving! [*Laughs.*]



Lucille's Vital Statistics

Neck width: 1.698" at the nut, 2.055" at the 12th fret.

Fret size: .098" wide x .045" (leveled and dressed, the frets range from .038" to .045", with an average height of .040").

Polepiece height *(measured with the strings open rather than pressed down):* In the bridge position, 5/64" at the high *E*, 9/64" at the low *E*. Neck pickup: 9/64" (almost 5/32") at the high *E*, 13/64" (a heavy 3/16") at the low *E*.

Nut height/string clearance *(measured from the bottom of the string to top of the 1st fret):* .015" for the high *E*, .038" for the low. The open strings don't buzz.

Neck relief *(measured at the 7th and 8th frets)*: .030". This is a lot of relief. A more normal .015" could be accomplished by slightly tightening the truss rod a quarter-turn or less.

String height at the 12th fret *(bottom of outside* E *strings to the top of the 12th fret)*: All strings measured 7/64" in height across the board—a stiff, high action!

String width at the nut *(measured with dial calipers from the outside* E *to* E): 1.425".

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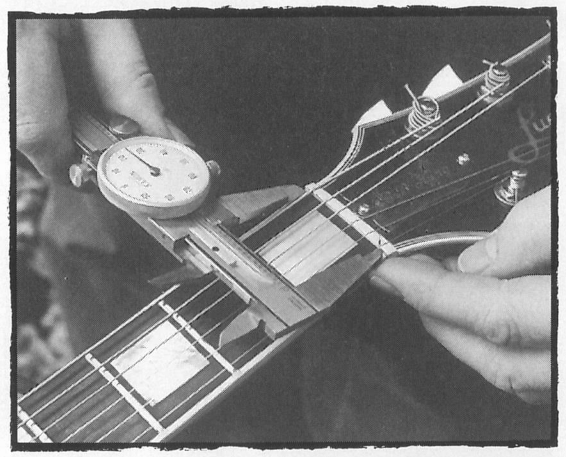
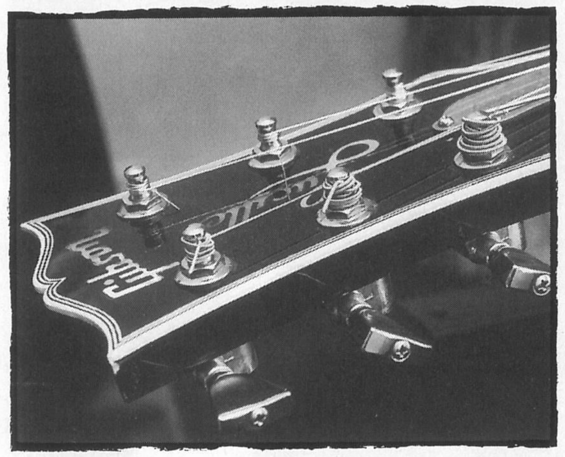
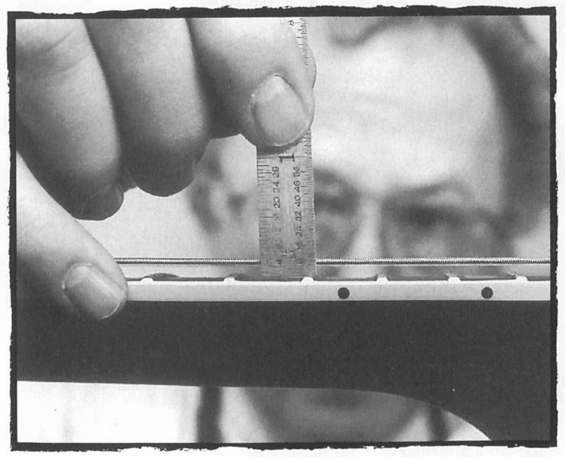


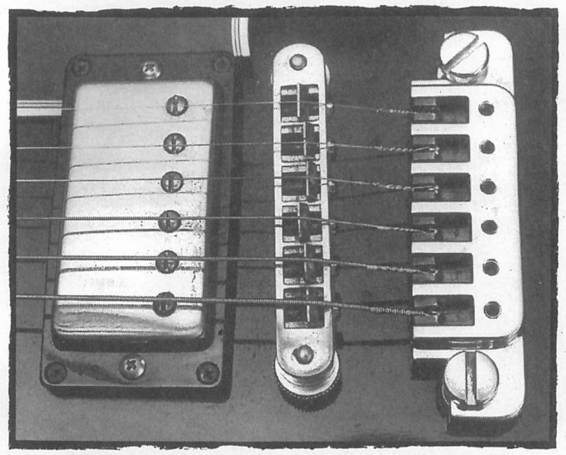
The outside *E*-to-*E* measurement tells more than the neck-width measurement.



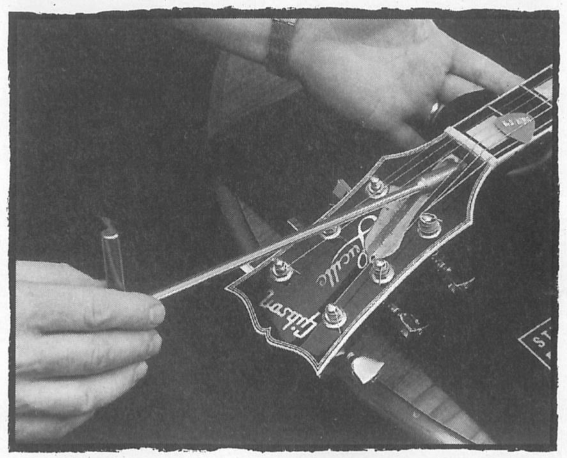
When B.B. says he uses the whole string, he ain't kidding!



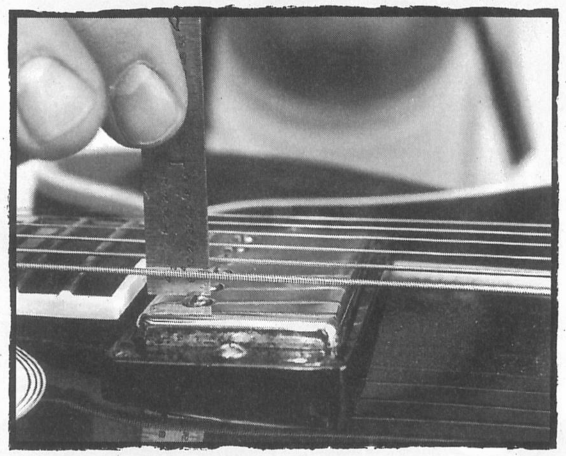
B.B. likes a stiff action and a fairly heavy string.



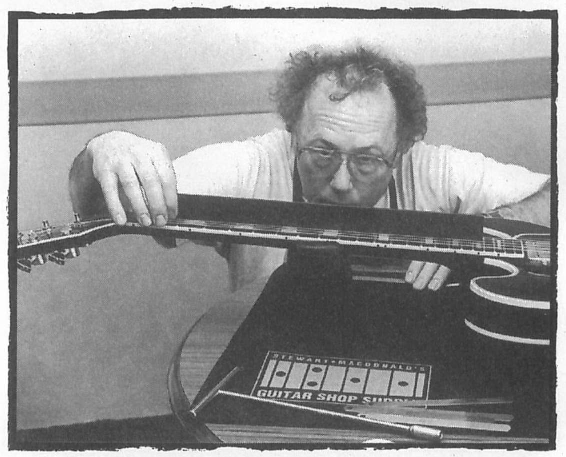
B.B. removed the TP6 fine-tuners. Note the settings of Lucille's bridge saddles.



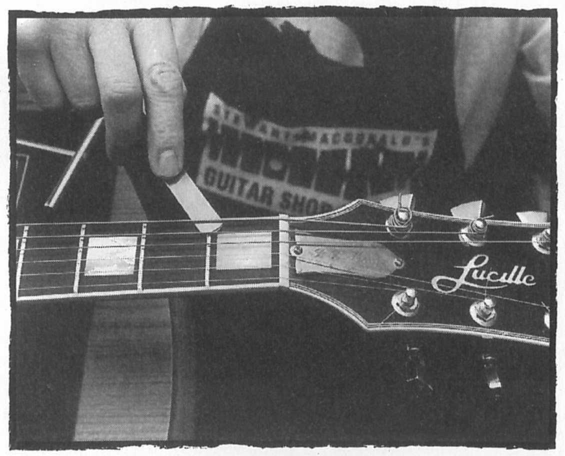
Although I didn't dare change the truss-rod setting without permission, a quarter-turn would have significantly lowered the action.



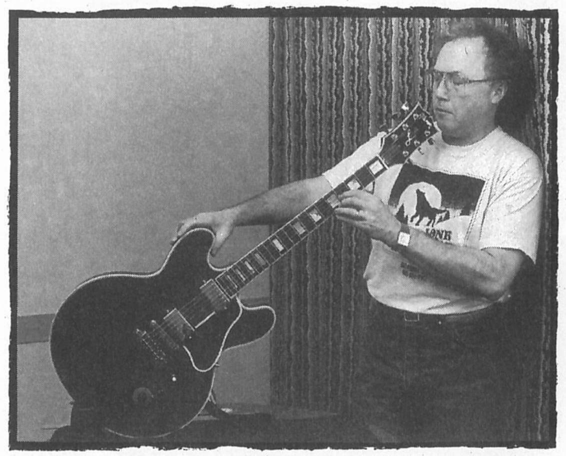
Measuring how close the polepieces are to the string.



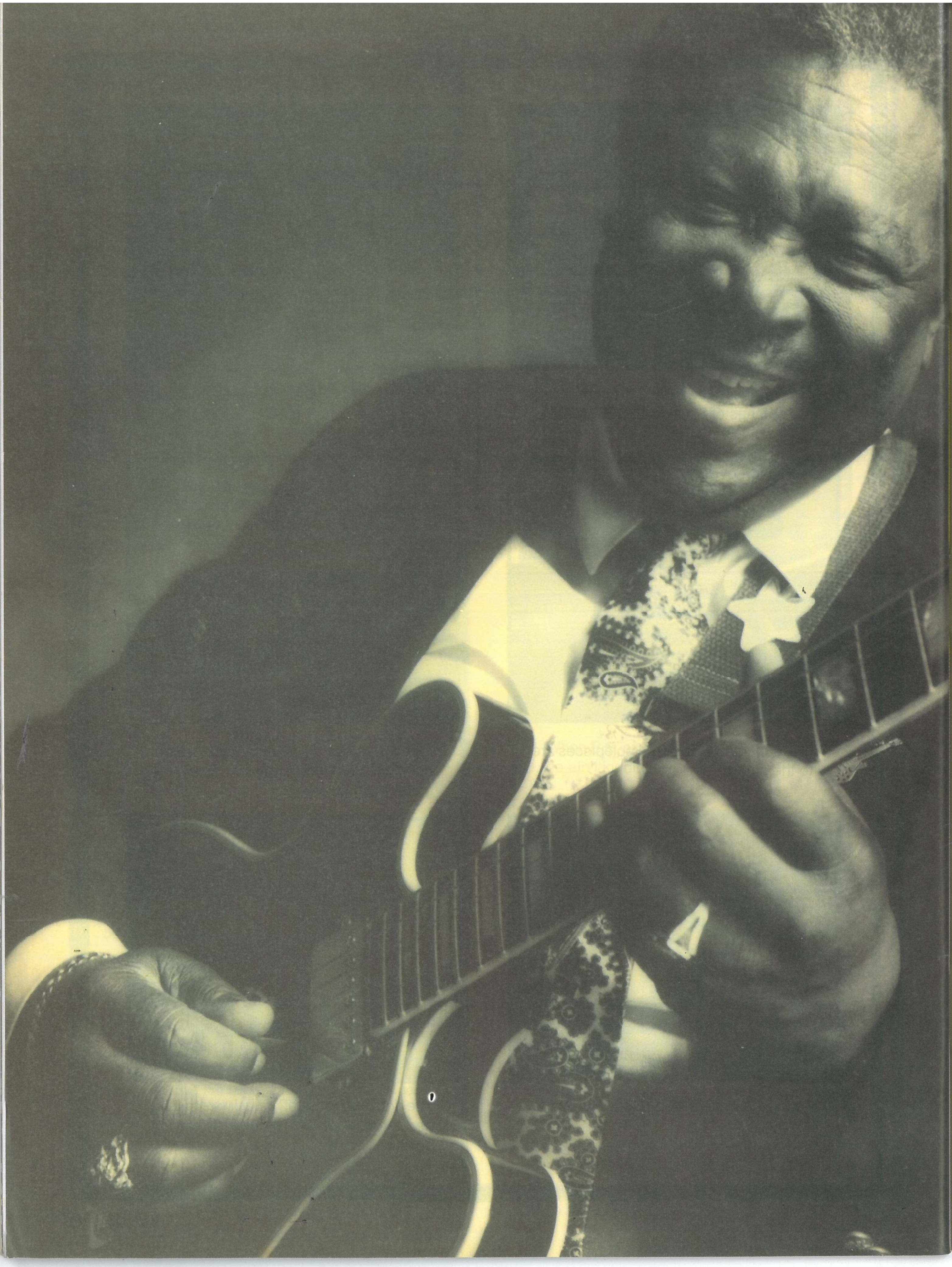
You can check for relief in this position, but it will read differently than when the guitar is on its side.



Lucille has lots of string clearance at the 1st fret.



The right way to "sight" a neck for straightness or relief with the guitar in its playing position.



Next to John Lee Hooker, B.B. King is the most extensively recorded blues artist in history, having cut hundreds of sides for over 15 different record labels during his 45 years in the biz. Though B.B.'s prolific output makes assembling even a reasonably complete library an immense undertaking, releases such as MCA's fine 77-song retrospective, *B.B. King: King Of The Blues*, offer an easy way to sample his rich musical history. This CD box set spans from 1949's "Miss Martha King" through his recent collaborations with U2, Bonnie Raitt, and Gary Moore. Other superb retrospectives include *Do The Boogie: B.B. King's Early '50s Classics* (Flair/Virgin), *The Best Of B.B. King* (Ace), and Flair/Virgin's *Spotlight On Lucille*, a collection of King's instrumentals from '60-'61. For the rest of you truly hardcore B.B. King fans, here's an extensive discography.

—Art Thompson

the B.B. King discography

compiled by Jas Obrecht

discography

early recordings:

The Rarest King ('49), Blues Boy
Singing The Blues (early/mid '50s RPM sides), United
The Blues (early/mid '50s), United
Best Of B.B. King (reissue of first LP), Flair/Virgin
Singin' The Blues/The Blues (RPM/Crown/United), Flair/Virgin
The Feeling They Call The Blues, Vol. 1 (RPM/Kent), Trio
The Feeling They Call The Blues, Vol. 2 (RPM/Kent), Trio
Ambassador Of The Blues (RPM/Kent), Crown

on Ace:

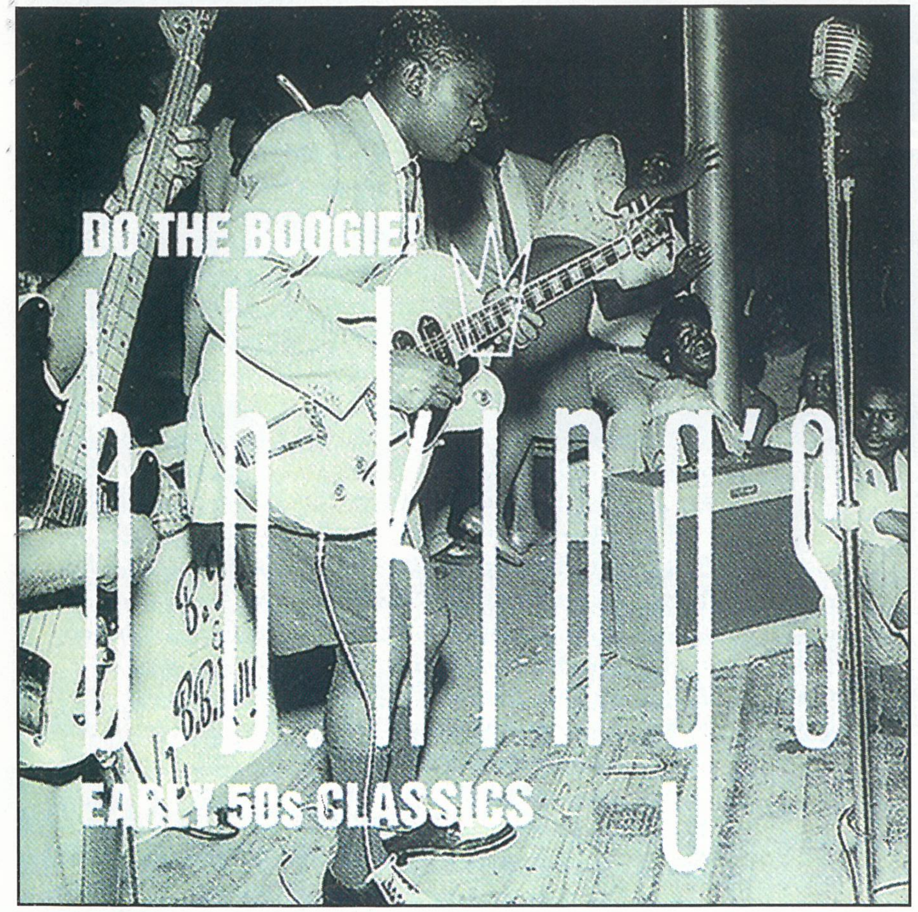
The Memphis Masters ('50-'52)
King Of The Blues Guitar ('50s instrumentals)
Rock Me Baby (Crown)
The Best Of B.B. King, Volume One and *Volume Two* (RPM/Kent)
Do The Boogie! (early '50s)
One Nighter Blues ('51-'54)
Across The Tracks ('51-'57)
Lucille Had A Baby (mid '50s)
The Fabulous B.B. King (Modern)
My Sweet Little Angel (Modern)
Heart And Soul (Kent and Modern)

on Kent:

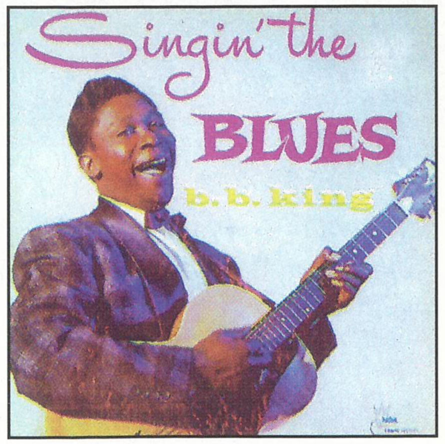
You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now
Incredible Soul Of B.B. King
I Just Sing The Blues
Better Than Ever
The Unexpected Instrumental B.B. King
Boss Of The Blues
Doing My Thing Lord
From The Beginning
The Jungle
Greatest Hits Of B.B. King
Pure Soul
Let Me Love You
Rock Me Baby
Underground Blues
Turn On With B.B. King
Anthology Of The Blues

on United:

The Great B.B. King (mid to late '50s)
I Love You So ('58-'59)
The Soul Of B.B. King
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (gospel songs)
My Kind Of Blues ('60)
A Heart Full Of Blues
Easy Listening Blues
Blues For Me
King Of The Blues
Let Me Love You
Onstage—Live
The Jungle



the Blues
BB KING



Boss Of The Blues
The Incredible Soul . . .
Turn On
Better Than Ever
Live
The Original Sweet Sixteen

1960s-'90s (on MCA):

Live At The Regal ('64)
Why I Sing The Blues
Live And Well
Back In The Alley ('64-'67)
Blues Is King (live in Chicago, '66)
Great Moments With B.B. King ('66-'68)
Guitar Player
His Best: The Electric B.B. King
Live In Japan ('71)
Live At Cook County Jail ('71)
Indianola Mississippi Seeds ('72)
To Know You Is To Love You ('73)
Friends ('74)
Two On One (combines *Live At The Regal* and *Live At Cook County Jail*)
Lucille Talks Back ('75)
The Best Of B.B. King
Completely Well
Midnight Believer ('78)
Take It Home ('79)
Now Appearing At Ole Miss ('80)
There Must Be A Better World Somewhere ('81)
Blues 'N' Jazz ('83)
Love Me Tender ('85)
Six Silver Strings ('85)
King Of The Blues, 1989
Live At San Quentin ('91)
Blues Summit ('93)

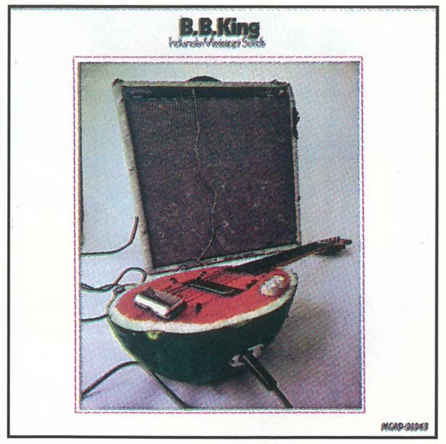
other labels:

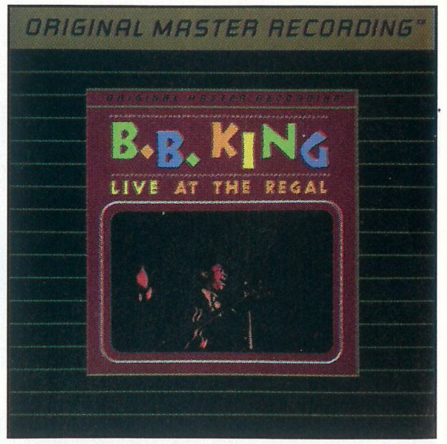
Completely Well (reissue of Bluesway's *Live And Well* and *Completely Well*), Charly
Spotlight On Lucille (instrumentals, '60-'61), Flair/Virgin
Blues Is King ('67), Bluesway
Lucille ('68), BGO
Blues On Top Of Blues (Bluesway, '68), BGO
His Best: The Electric B.B. King (Bluesway, '69), BGO
B.B. King In London (with British rockers, '71), BGO
Guess Who ('72), ABC
B.B. King (Newport Jazz, '72), Accord
16 Original Big Hits (reissue of Galaxy's *B.B. King's 16 Greatest Hits*), Fantasy
B.B. King Live At The Apollo ('91), GRP

with Bobby Bland:

Together For The First Time . . . Live, MCA
Together Again, MCA
I Like To Live The Love, MCA

the best of
B.B.King
ace
volume one
DIGITALLY MASTERED





discography

with others:

Sonny Boy Williamson, *Goin' In Your Direction* ('50s), Trumpet
U2, *Rattle And Hum* ('88), Island

anthologies:

Atlantic Blues: Guitar ('72), Atlantic
Live At Newport, Intermedia
Blues Masters, Volume 7: Blues Revival, Rhino
Blues Masters, Volume 8: Mississippi Delta Blues, Rhino
Blues Masters, Volume 9: Postmodern Blues, Rhino
The Fifties: Juke Joint Blues, Flair/Virgin
Juke Box R&B, Flair/Virgin
A Sun Blues Collection, Rhino
Blues Guitar Blasters, Ace
Legends Of Guitar—Electric Blues, Vol. 1 and *Vol. 2*, Rhino

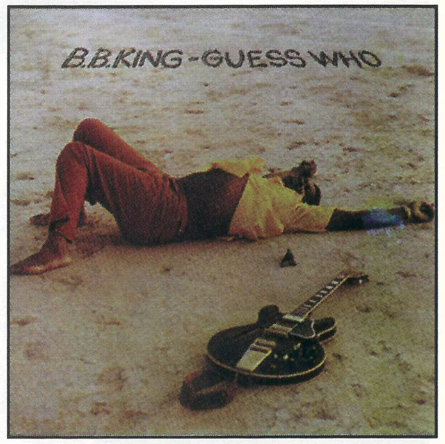
soundtracks:

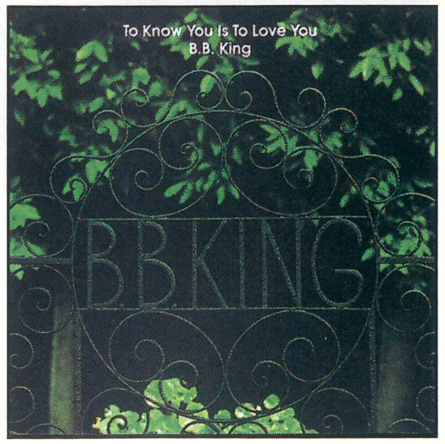
For Love Of Ivy ('68)
The Seven Minutes ('71)
Black Rodeo ('72)
FM ('78)
When You Coming Back, Red Rider? ('79)
Into The Night ('85)
The Color Of Money ('86)
Air America
Heart & Soul

on film:

Monterey Jazz Festival ('67)
Monterey Jazz ('68)
Medicine Ball Caravan ('70), Warner Bros.
En Remontant Le Mississippi/Out Of The Blacks, Into The Blues ('71 West German/French film available from Yazoo Video)
Blues Music In America—From Then 'Til Now ('71)
Le Blues Entre Les Dents/Blues Between The Teeth ('72)
Sing Sing Thanksgiving ('73)
Black, White And Blues ('74)
Give My Poor Heart Ease (William Ferris' 1975 documentary features footage on acoustic and electric guitar)
Got Something To Tell You: Sounds Of The Delta Blues ('77)
Good Mornin' Blues (King narrates this '78 production by Mississippi ETV available from Yazoo Video)
Live At Nick's ('83, Sony Video)
New Orleans Jazz And Heritage Festival
Memories From Beale Street
Let The Good Times Roll With B.B. King
B.B. King & Friends ('87).
B.B. explains his guitar technique in DCI's three-video *B.B. King Blues Master* set.
B.B. King has also appeared on numerous TV talk shows and sitcoms.

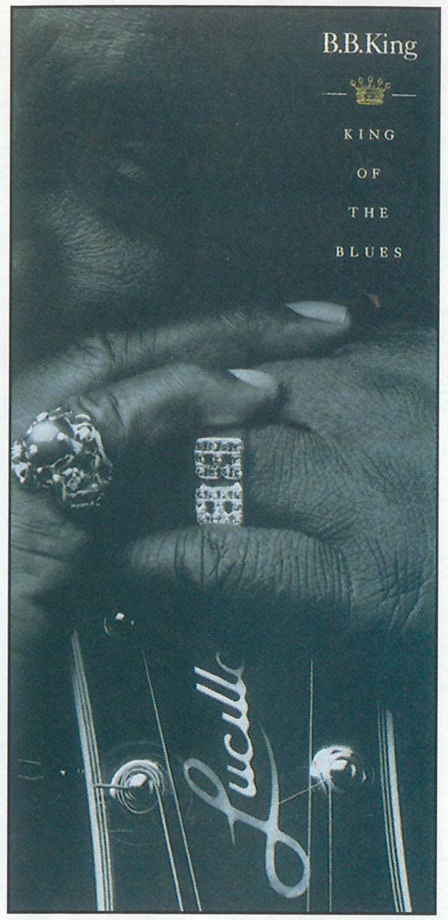
Lucille
B.B.King


B.B.KING - GUESS WHO


To Know You Is To Love You
B.B. King
B.B.KING

B.B. KING
SPOTLIGHT ON LUCILLE

B.B. King
There is always one more time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KING OF THE BLUES
Lucille

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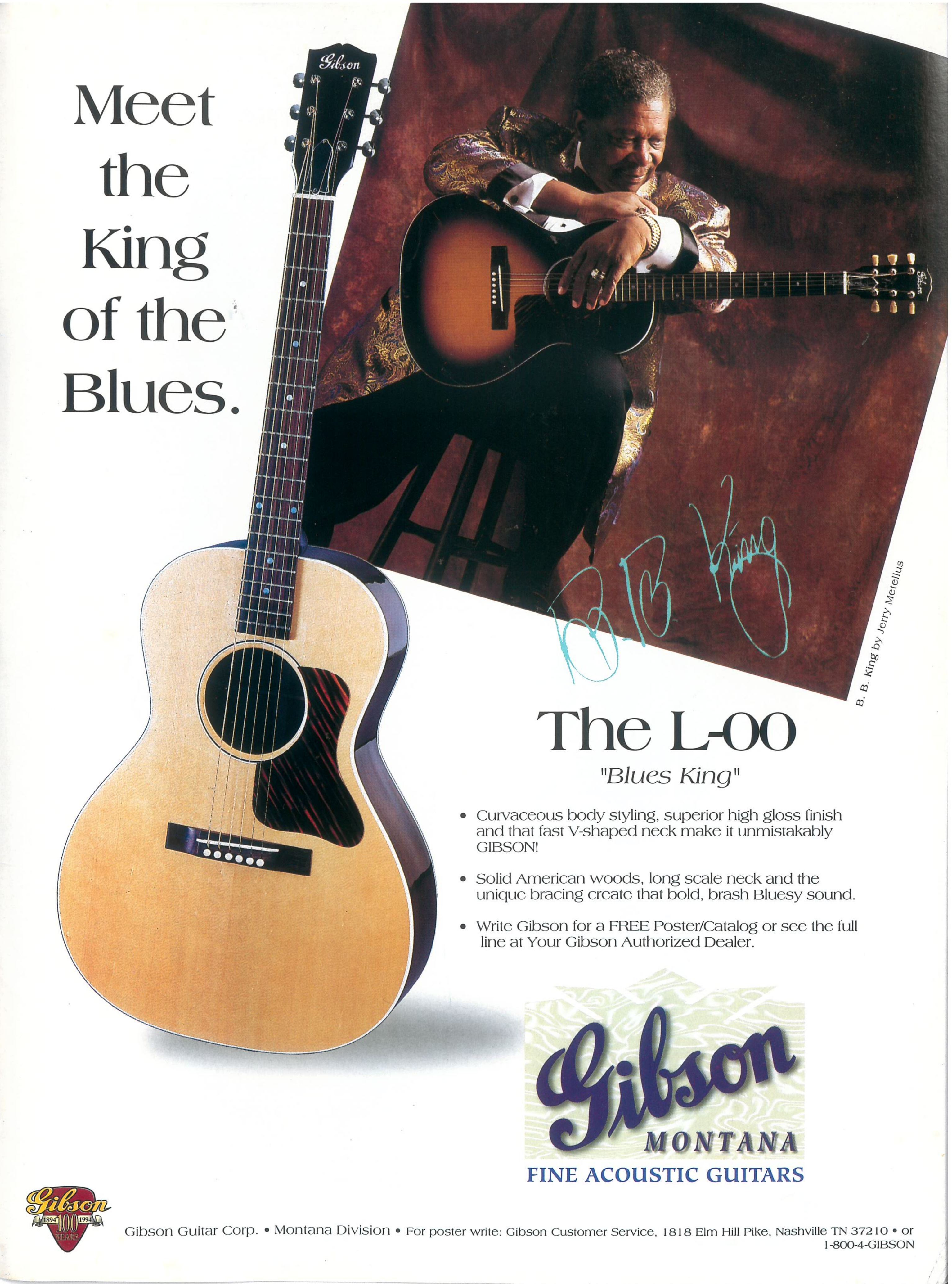

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